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The Blount Family in the long Sixteenth century

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The Blount Family in the Long Sixteenth Century

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Doctor of Philosophy

2019

King's College London

Abstract

This thesis is an extended case study of the lives, attitudes, actions and concerns of one gentry family – the Blounts of the West Midlands – from the second half of the fifteenth century to the early years of the seventeenth, described as the long sixteenth century. As well as looking at a family who are of interest in their own right, this thesis also sheds light on local, political, legal, religious, family and social aspects of the period, providing information on ties of local obligation, religious identity, political loyalties, the workings of kinship networks and some of the transformations unfolding in early modern society.

The thesis takes a thematic approach, looking first at the family's economic background and local political role, with aspects of gentility, landownership and the offices of sheriff and justice of the peace considered. The family's role in the law courts as judges, litigants and defendants is then considered, as well as their role in parliament, their military involvement and their participation in patronage networks. Finally, the Blounts' religious role is considered, both in the early Reformation period and as a primarily Catholic family in the Elizabethan period. In particular, the family's continuing ability to hold government and local offices are discussed, along with the fact that their Catholicism was widely recognised.

This study of the Blounts can be situated within the wide range of gentry studies relating to the period. The many ways in which the Blounts interacted with their environment has meant that this study has ramifications for an historical understanding of many different areas.

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would first like to thank my supervisor, Doctor Lucy Wooding for her guidance and encouragement. Her comments have been both inspirational and motivational.

I would also like to thank Doctor Hannah Dawson, for her supervision in the last years of this project and for her encouragement and very useful comments on the draft of the thesis.

I would like to thank the staff at the British Library, the National Archives and the various local archives consulted, particularly the Shropshire Archives at Shrewsbury for their advice and assistance in my research. Thanks are due, too, to Charles Blount, who kindly gave me access to his papers relating to his family history and to other members of the Blount family who have been in contact. I would also like to thank the Society of Renaissance Studies for their Study Fellowship which allowed me to carry out research into tombs relating to the family. The two small research grants awarded to me by King's College London also permitted me to attend conferences and better define the scope of this work.

Lastly, I thank my family – especially David, Dominic, Barnaby and Ianthe - for their unfailing support and patience.

Introduction

This thesis is an extended case study of the lives, attitudes, actions and concerns of one gentry family – the Blounts of the West Midlands – from the second half of the fifteenth century to the early years of the seventeenth, described as the long sixteenth century. As a family, they are of interest in their own right. The close analysis will also shed light on local, political, legal, religious, family and social histories of the period. It will show how the role of a single gentry family can illuminate ties of local obligation, religious identity and political loyalty, the workings of kinship networks and the many transformations unfolding in early modern society.

With the exception of the Mountjoy branch of the family, the Blounts have received little scholarly attention, largely due to the fact that they did not play a prominent role at court and held limited crown office.¹ By the late fifteenth century there were several branches of the family, with the most prestigious branch enjoying ennoblement as the Barons Mountjoy in 1465.² The first Lord Mountjoy was the grandson of Walter Blount of Rock and Sodington who served Edward, the Black Prince in 1367 and was closely connected to John of Gaunt, serving as his chamberlain between c.1392 and 1399.³ He died fighting for Henry IV in 1403. In addition to the Mountjoy Blounts, Walter was the ancestor of the Blounts of Burton,

¹ The family were the subjects of study in the following works: William Shakespear Childe-Pemberton, *Elizabeth Blount and Henry VIII with Some Account of her Surroundings* (London, 1913) and Alexander Croke, *The Genealogical History of the Croke Family, Originally Named Le Blount*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1823). They were also considered in one chapter of Beverley Murphy, 'The Life and Political Significance of Henry Fitzroy, Duke of Richmond, 1525-1536' (Univ. of Wales, Bangor, PhD thesis, 1997) and Beverley Murphy, *Bastard Prince, Henry VIII's Lost Son* (Stroud, 2001).

² See family tree in appendix.

³ <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1386-1421/member/blount-sir-walter-1403> date accessed 5 March 2019.

Uttoxeter, Mapledurham and Grendon.⁴ Due to their prominence and previous scholarly interest, the Mountjoys have been almost entirely omitted from this thesis. By 1374 Walter Blount's elder half-brother had inherited the family's principal manors, including Sodington in the parish of Mamble in Worcestershire. In the mid fifteenth century John Blount of Kinlet, who was the second son of Walter's great-nephew, inherited the Shropshire manor of Kinlet from his mother, while his elder half-brother inherited Sodington.⁵ The Blounts of Kinlet, who in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth-centuries divided into the Blounts of Eye (or Yeo), Astley, Kidderminster and Eckington, were the most numerous and prosperous branch in the early modern period, with the exception of the Mountjoys. Due to a good document survival rate and the mixed economic status of the Kinlet Blounts and their offshoots, they are the focus of this research with the aim of uncovering the experiences, connections, political, social and religious roles of an otherwise unremarkable gentry family of middling status, of the type often overlooked in historical study. The relationship between Elizabeth Blount of Kinlet and Henry VIII (which produced Henry Fitzroy, Duke of Richmond) is not considered, since it has already drawn scholars' attention.⁶ Where appropriate, comparisons have been drawn with the wider family, particularly the neighbouring Blounts of Sodington.

The study of the Kinlet Blounts and their wider kin is not without its complications. The Blounts have no surviving archive. Instead, this research draws on documents in the National Archives, the British Library, multiple local archives (since the family's sphere of influence spanned several West Midlands' counties) and the surviving papers of contemporary

⁴ *The Visitation of Shropshire, Taken in the Year 1623, part I*, eds. George Grazebrook and John Paul Rylands (The Harleian Society, 1889), 51.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Murphy, 'Life and Political Significance of Henry Fitzroy'; Murphy, *Bastard Prince*; Childe Pemberton, *Elizabeth Blount and Henry VIII*.

noblemen, in particular Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, in whose household several members served. This archival legacy affects the types of material that survives. Chancery and Star Chamber Court records are particularly numerous, while personal letters are scant. Documents relating to the family's local economic interests survive in some archives, but not all, although they are sufficient to allow pertinent conclusions to be drawn. It might be expected that the family would appear in the papers of Ambrose Dudley, Earl of Warwick (c.1530-1590), and his father, John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland (1504-1553), in whose households they served, but archival traces do not survive in any great number. In some respects, this might seem to be an insurmountable obstacle to historical analysis. John Broad, for example, notes in relation to the Verney family, who are a similar upper gentry family, that his study was only possible due to the extensive surviving family archive.⁷ In relation to the Blounts, the more multi-faceted way in which the material exists negates the potentially skewed nature of a more selectively assembled archive: the family are not viewed through the prism of how they, or their descendants, wished themselves to be presented. While the survival rate is undoubtedly lower, the material is less selectively retained and provides a more nuanced picture of the family.⁸ Carrying out an analysis of scattered material thus demonstrates that such a study is possible and in fact the lack of a single archive might be viewed as a strength, with strands of analysis being drawn from multiple sources.

The research for this thesis has uncovered material pertinent for several historiographical themes including gentry studies, the family, gender, the relationship between the parish and the manor, litigation and conflict, electoral competition and the prestige of membership of

⁷ John Broad, *Transforming English Rural Society: The Verneys and the Claydons, 1600-1820* (Cambridge, 2004), 9.

⁸ Liesbeth Corens, Kate Peters and Alexandra Walsham, (eds.), *Archives & Information in the Early Modern World* (Oxford, 2018), considers the relationships between archives and historical research, with an emphasis on the history of the archive, for example, which considers their often selectively collected nature.

parliament, military retaining and patronage and the Reformation. The many ways in which the Blounts interacted with their environment has meant that this study has ramifications for an historical understanding of many different areas.

Gentry Studies

There is a long-standing range of historiography on English gentry families, across the late medieval and early modern periods. Works in the 1940s and 1950s were dominated by controversy over the role of the gentry in the English Civil War, with R.H Tawney's 'The Rise of the Gentry, 1558-1640' arguing in 1941 that a rise in the gentry in the sixteenth century led to conflict with the aristocracy and, ultimately, civil war, a position which was endorsed by Lawrence Stone in 1948.⁹ This was highly contentious, with Hugh Trevor-Roper instead arguing for an economic decline of the gentry in the period, while J.H. Hexter later dismissed the idea that either a decline or a rise in the gentry could have caused the conflict.¹⁰ Other works, such as John Smith Roskell's *The Knights of the Shire for the County Palatine of Lancaster (1377-1460)* from 1937 and Kenneth Bruce McFarlane's 'Bastard Feudalism' from 1943-5, highlighted the merits of studying this important social and economic class over several generations.¹¹ In the 1950s, Mary Finch considered five Northamptonshire gentry families between 1540 and 1640, with her research making an important contribution to the study of both Northamptonshire and wider rural society in the early modern period.¹² Indeed, county studies of the gentry – usually up to the English Civil War – remained prominent in

⁹ Lawrence Stone, 'The Anatomy of the Elizabethan Aristocracy', *Economic History Review*, 18 (1948), 1-53; R.H. Tawney, 'The Rise of the Gentry, 1558-1640', *Economic History Review*, 11 (1941), 1-38.

¹⁰ Hugh Trevor-Roper, 'The Elizabethan Aristocracy: An Anatomy Anatomized', *Economic History Review*, New Series, 3 (1951), 279-298; Hugh Trevor Roper's *The Gentry 1540-1640* (*Economic History Review* Supplement I, 1953); J.H. Hexter, 'Storm over the Gentry', *Reappraisals in History* (1961), 117-62.

¹¹ John Smith Roskell, *The Knights of the Shire for the County Palatine of Lancaster (1377-1460)* (Manchester, 1937); Kenneth Bruce McFarlane, 'Bastard Feudalism', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 20 (1943-5).

¹² Mary E. Finch, *The Wealth of Five Northamptonshire Families 1540-1640* (Oxford, 1956).

the middle years of the twentieth century, with their economic and social focus still informed by the earlier historical debate.¹³

More recently, works such as Eric Acheson's *A Gentry Community: Leicestershire in the Fifteenth Century, c.1422-c.1485*, have sought to acknowledge the agency of the late medieval gentry, as opposed to viewing them merely as reacting to change or on a predetermined path towards modernity, while Felicity Heal and Clive Holmes took a similar approach in the early modern period in *The Gentry in England and Wales 1500-1700*.¹⁴ Others, such as Jan Broadway's *'No Historie So Meete': Gentry Culture and the Development of Local History in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* take a broader approach, studying the gentry of England as a whole, albeit through the specific focus of their interest in and use of history in their everyday lives.¹⁵ Jacqueline Eales' *Puritans and Roundheads*, which studies the Harleys of Brampton Bryan, on the other hand, is very specific, focussing on one family in the pivotal English Civil War period.¹⁶ Many, such as William Raleigh Trimble's *The Catholic Laity in Elizabethan England* are thematic, using the gentry to inform on the position of English Catholics in the period.¹⁷ Peter Marshall and Geoffrey Scott's *Catholic Gentry in English Society*, considered the Throckmorton family from the sixteenth until the eighteenth century, with a particular focus on their religion.¹⁸ Michael Questier's *Catholicism and Community in Early Modern England: Politics,*

¹³ J.T. Cliffe, *The Yorkshire Gentry: From the Reformation to the Civil War* (London, 1969); Howell A. Lloyd, *The Gentry of South Wales 1540-1640* (Cardiff, 1968).

¹⁴ Eric Acheson, *A Gentry Community: Leicestershire in the Fifteenth Century, c.1422-c.1485* (Cambridge, 1992); Felicity Heal and Clive Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales 1500-1700* (Stanford, 1994).

¹⁵ Jan Broadway, *'No Historie So Meete': Gentry Culture and the Development of Local History in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (Manchester, 2006).

¹⁶ Jacqueline Eales, *Puritans and Roundheads: The Harleys of Brampton Bryan and the Outbreak of the English Civil War* (Cambridge, 1990).

¹⁷ William Raleigh Trimble, *The Catholic Laity in Elizabethan England* (Cambridge, 1964).

¹⁸ Peter Marshall and Geoffrey Scott, eds., *Catholic Gentry in English Society: The Throckmortons of Coughton From Reformation to Emancipation* (Farnham, 2009).

Aristocratic Patronage and Religion, c.1550-1640 also considered religion and raised questions about the links between the gentry and the aristocracy.¹⁹ Susan M. Cogan, too, has considered the Catholic gentry of the Midlands between 1570 and 1630, focussing particularly on patronage networks and political engagement.²⁰ Other geographically distinct studies of the gentry, such as Mervyn James' study of the Durham region in the early modern period and Matthew John Clark's study of the gentry of Essex and Middlesex between 1558 and 1625 have also been enlightening, with these works focussing both on local society and politics.²¹

Recently, gentry family studies have enjoyed a particular prominence. For example, Miriam Slater analysed the Verneys, looking at the seventeenth-century members of the family through their marriages.²² Broad, too, has studied the Verneys in relation to their transformative role in English rural society, while Susan E. Whyman considered the Verneys' cultural world in the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth.²³ Rosemary O'Day's recent work on the Temples of Stowe and Burton Dassett between 1570 and 1656 also has specific research aims – seeking to study the dynamics of family life rather than analysing the family's political or economic position.²⁴ O'Day's focus on the wider kinship links of the family is of particular relevance to this study, with this thesis similarly situating the Blounts

¹⁹ Michael Questier, *Catholicism and Community in Early Modern England: Politics, Aristocratic Patronage and Religion, c.1550-1640* (Cambridge, 2006).

²⁰ Susan M. Cogan, 'Catholic Gentry, Family Networks and Patronage in the English Midlands, c.1570-1630' (University of Colorado, PhD thesis, 2012).

²¹ Mervyn James, *Family, Lineage and Civil Society: A Study of Society, Politics, and Mentality in the Durham Region, 1500-1640* (Oxford, 1974); Matthew John Clark, 'The Gentry as Governors in early modern England, with special reference to Middlesex and Essex, 1558-1625' (University of Cambridge, PhD thesis, 2008).

²² Miriam Slater, 'The Weightiest Business: Marriage in an Upper Gentry Family in Seventeenth Century England', *Past and Present*, 71 (1976), 26-54.

²³ Broad, *Transforming English Rural Society*; Susan E. Whyman, *Sociability and Power in Late Stuart England: The Cultural World of the Verneys, 1660-1720* (Oxford, 2007).

²⁴ Rosemary O'Day, *An Elite Family in Early Modern England: The Temples of Stowe and Burton Dassett, 1570-1656* (Woodbridge, 2018).

within wider networks beyond the nuclear family (see below). Vivienne Larminie takes a similar approach in relation to the gentry-status Newdigates of Arbury in the seventeenth century, whom she uses as a case study to inform on the lifestyle and attitudes of the gentry, noting that historians have long recognised the insights that can be gained from family studies.²⁵

While the specific research questions may vary, these studies provide a general framework for the Blounts conceptually, as both a family and an element within a wider network. While the conclusions of this study are specific to the Blount family, they also contribute to the already wide range of gentry studies, with the conclusions drawn of relevance to local history, but also our understanding of politics, society and religion in the Reformation period.²⁶ In relation to the Newdigates, for example, Larminie concludes that they were not unusual in their experiences and attitudes and can be considered part of the ‘moderate majority of late Elizabethan and Stuart England’.²⁷ As will be shown, with the exception of their religion in the Elizabethan period, there is little to prevent members of the Blount family from being considered to be broadly typical members of the upper gentry in the period in question. Broad, too, in his study of the Verneys and the Claydons between 1600 and 1820, considered that by using a gentry family as a case study it was possible to draw conclusions on social and political change, with his work demonstrating ‘how great landowning families and their dynastic ambitions moulded the rural economy, shaped the landscape of England, and interacted with rural society and village communities to produce effects that are still strongly visible in the twenty-first century’.²⁸ The Blounts, who were equally dominant in

²⁵ Vivienne Larminie, *Wealth, Kinship and Culture: The 17th-Century Newdigates of Arbury and their World* (Woodbridge, 1995), 1.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Broad, *Transforming English Rural Society*, 1.

their local community and as prominent in local politics, can be used to achieve similar conclusions. As such, this study can be firmly situated within the long-established historiography of gentry studies in the late medieval and early modern periods.

Family and Gender

Gentry studies have much in common with the increasing study of the family which became a substantial feature of late twentieth-century historiography.²⁹ As O'Day notes, the term 'family' is a fluid one and difficult to define.³⁰ In the early modern period, it was largely used to describe the household, the biological family who resided together and the broader non-resident kin.³¹ It has long been recognised by historians that the family – which was often portrayed in the period as a microcosm of the state – was a social, economic and political unit of very considerable importance.³² Stone was the first historian to consider the early modern family in depth, arguing that this could explain the massive cultural changes that he perceived as taking place between 1500 and 1800.³³ For Stone, the period was characterised by the growth of the nuclear family, witnessing 'the decline of loyalties to lineage, kin, patron and local community as they were increasingly replaced by more universalistic loyalties to the nation state and its head, and to a particular sect or Church'.³⁴ This was conceived as a

²⁹ Christopher Durston, *The Family in the English Revolution* (Oxford, 1989), 1. Indeed, the family was the central focus of the very recently published study of the Temples of Stowe and Burton Dassett (O'Day, *An Elite Family*, 1).

³⁰ Rosemary O'Day, *The Family and Family Relationships, 1500-1900: England, France and the United States of America* (Basingstoke, 1994), xv.

³¹ *Ibid.*, xviii.

³² Susan D. Amussen, *An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1988), 1; Susan D. Amussen, 'Gender, Family, and the Social Order, 1560-1725' in Anthony Fletcher and John Stevenson (eds.), *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1985), 196-217; James Casey, *The History of the Family*, (Oxford, 1989), 41, 166; Garthine Walker, *Crime, Gender and Social Order in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2003), 9; Lena Cowen Orlin, *Elizabethan Households* (Washington DC, 1995), 146; O'Day, *The Family and Family Relationships*, xviii; Mary Abbot, *Family Ties: English Families 1540-1920* (New York, 1993), 1; Helen Berry and Elizabeth A. Foyster (eds.), *The Family in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2007), 1; Casey, *The History of the Family*, 15.

³³ Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (London, 1977).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

gradual shift, leading to families becoming closed off from external influences, such as kin or community.³⁵ Stone was not asserting that all families from the later sixteenth century were nuclear, but he did consider that most were.³⁶ He also considered that, with growing state centralisation in the period, allegiance among kin groups was considerably reduced. Stone's work continues to be debated, with criticism that he had exaggerated the apparent shift to a nuclear family, that there had never been one single family type in western Europe and that his work was Whiggish in approach – envisioning a progression of the family towards modernity.³⁷

This study recognises the importance of Stone's work in focussing historians' attention on the early modern family, but it follows more closely the work of Ralph Houlbrooke, Michael Anderson, David Cressy and many others who have expressed reservations about the extent to which the surviving sources can illuminate either the structure of families or demonstrate change. While this study of the Blounts is a study of a family, it is not specifically a family study since the surviving sources do not provide any clear picture of exactly who was living in the household at any one time. The surviving material does not allow for an analysis of the nuclear family in relation to the Blounts, nor can they provide any corroboration for conceptions of the family as being broadly synonymous with the household, which is now common in the historiography of the family and is a frequent finding of gentry studies.³⁸ At best, it is clear that the Blount family could be a complex one – with large families meaning

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 24.

³⁷ Berry and Foyster, *The Family in Early Modern England*, 1; Casey, *The History of the Family*, 1; Ralph Houlbrooke, *The English Family* (Harlow, 1984), 14-15; Michael Anderson, *Approaches to the History of the Western Family, 1500-1914* (London, 1980), 13-14; J.A. Sharpe, *Early Modern England: A Social History, 1550-1760* (London, 1997), 57, 59; David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death: Ritual, Religion and the Life Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford and New York, 1997), 10.

³⁸ Larminie, *Wealth, Kinship and Culture*, 3.

that the youngest children very frequently overlapped in birth with their parents' eldest grandchildren.³⁹

While the Blounts cannot provide conclusive evidence on household structure, they can contribute to debates on the importance of wider kinship, with such groups defined as 'adults who are related through blood or marriage, and any others whom people treat as relatives; for example, people who have been adopted, or cohabitees'.⁴⁰ One consequence of Stone's work is that it has called into question the importance of kinship groups in the early modern period. So, too, did the influential work of Alan Macfarlane, which, while at odds with Stone's core argument of changing family structures, also downplayed the importance of kinship groups.⁴¹ Keith Wrightson, writing about the village of Terling in Essex, found much to support Macfarlane (and, thus, also Stone in relation to kinship), considering kinship links between villagers to be few.⁴² He was highly critical of Miranda Chaytor, whose research suggested an alternative view, considering that connections between kinship groups were often obscured due to surviving source material and due to a focus of studies on individual households or families.⁴³ Wrightson, challenging the narrowness of Chaytor's focus, re-emphasised his understanding that the most usual type of family was a nuclear one.⁴⁴ Rab Houston and Richard Smith also criticised Chaytor, considering that, while some widening of kinship networks in early modern rural societies can be seen, this was broadened at its widest to

³⁹ O'Day, *The Family and Family Relationships*, 14, 26; Berry and Foyster, *The Family in Early Modern England*, 7; Amussen, *An Ordered Society*, 67; Casey, *The History of the Family*, 166.

⁴⁰ Janet Finch, *Family Obligations and Social Change* (Cambridge, 1989), 3.

⁴¹ Alan MacFarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism* (Oxford, 1978).

⁴² Keith Wrightson and David Levine, *Poverty and Piety in an English Village: Terling 1525-1700* (Oxford, 1995), 85-92.

⁴³ Miranda Chaytor, 'Household and Kinship: Ryton in the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries', *History Workshop*, 10 (1980), 25-60.

⁴⁴ Keith Wrightson, 'Household and Kinship in Sixteenth-century England', *History Workshop*, 12 (1981), 151-158.

uncles and aunts only.⁴⁵ Will Coster considered that a shared grandparent was usually the extent to which relatedness was recognised.⁴⁶ These conclusions do not draw support from Cressy's work on seventeenth-century transatlantic correspondence, O'Day's work on the gentry Bagot family of Blithfield or her study of the Temples of Stowe and Burton Dassett, Govind Sreenivasan's study of land ownership in Earls Colne or Mary Abbot on the seventeenth-century family (amongst other studies) all of which identified very broad kinship relationships, with the family extending to very distant step-cousins and people of diverse social status.⁴⁷ The practical importance of such links have been questioned.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, gentry studies regularly identify broad kinship links, with the need for specific familial case studies identified.⁴⁹

This thesis follows these works in emphasising clear evidence of kinship's importance. While the relationship did not necessarily engender an obligation of support in itself, relatedness was a means of opening a relationship between otherwise unconnected individuals.⁵⁰ As a

⁴⁵ Rab Houston and Richard M Smith, 'A New Approach to Family History?', *History Workshop*, 14 (1982), 120-131.

⁴⁶ Will Coster, *Family and Kinship in England 1450-1800* (Harlow, 2001), 42.

⁴⁷ David Cressy, 'Kinship and kin interaction in early modern England', *Past and Present*, 113 (1986), 38-69; O'Day, *The Family and Family Relationships*, 66, 71; Govind Sreenivasan, 'The land-family bond in England: reply', *Past and Present*, 146 (1995), 176-187; Abbot, *Family Ties*, 11; O'Day, *An Elite Family*, 1-26; Peter Laslett, *Family Life and Illicit Love in Earlier Generations* (Cambridge, 1977), chapter 4; Naomi Tadmor, *Family and Friends in Eighteenth-Century England: Household, Kinship, and Patronage* (Cambridge, 2007), 122-156; Elizabeth Foyster, 'Parenting was for Life, not just for Childhood: The Role of Parents in the Married Lives of their Children in Early Modern England', *History*, 86 (2003), 313-27; Lloyd Bonfield, 'Normative Rules and Property Transmission: Reflections on the Link Between Marriage and Inheritance in Early Modern England', in Lloyd Bonfield, Richard M. Smith and Keith Wrightson, (eds.), *The World We Have Gained* (Oxford, 1986), 155-176.

⁴⁸ Finch, *Family Obligations*, 5.

⁴⁹ Cressy, 'Kinship and kin interaction', 41; David Sabean, 'Aspects of kinship behaviour and property in rural Western Europe before 1800' in Jack Goody, Joan Thirsk and E.P. Thompson, (eds.), *Family and Inheritance: Rural Society in Western Europe, 1200-1800* (Cambridge, 2011), 96-111; Houlbrooke, *The English Family*, 18; O'Day, *An Elite Family*, 8.

⁵⁰ Finch, *Family Obligations*, 5; O'Day, *An Elite Family*, 8.

result of the clear evidence of the importance of kinship to the Blounts, this study – while focussed on the Kinlet branch of the family – regularly widens to consider other branches.⁵¹

Over the last few decades social histories have increasingly considered the impact of gender and the evaluation of the role of women in a society that was conceived of as profoundly patriarchal.⁵² Women's political agency has been increasingly recognized while, as Barbara Harris notes, a greater focus on the politics of the court and great households has also led to an increasing recognition of women's political role.⁵³ This thesis considers gender in so far as it intersects with the Blount archive and in particular this thesis demonstrates the capacity for female political agency in the law courts. Whilst the absence of correspondence means we have limited access to the Blount women it is clear that they had an important role in the family grouping and the wider local community including the years in which Katherine Blount ran the manor of Kinlet.

⁵¹ The wider family has been described as 'still well-knit' in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. See Alan Davidson, 'Roman Catholicism in Oxfordshire from the late Elizabethan period to the Civil War (c.1580 – c.1640)' (Bristol Univ. PhD thesis, 1970), 81. The highly detailed family pedigree produced for Shropshire's 1623 heraldic visitation contains all major branches. Other evidence includes the relationship between Edward Blount of Kidderminster and Lord Mountjoy in the 1590s and an earlier Lord Mountjoy's appointment as trustee in the marriage settlement created by Sir Thomas Blount of Kinlet for his son and daughter-in-law in 1491 (see later). The Mapledurham Blounts claimed the Mountjoy barony in the seventeenth century on the basis of their distant kinship. Sir Michael Blount of Mapledurham and his sons were known to Lord Mountjoy and the Kidderminster Blounts (Davidson, 'Roman Catholicism in Oxfordshire', 81). These and numerous other instances are referenced throughout this thesis. As a result, although the focus is on the Kinlet branch, other branches are included where appropriate since the kinship link was known and recognised.

⁵² Christine Peters, *Women in Early Modern Britain, 1450-1640* (Cambridge, 2004), 7; Christine Peters, 'Gender, Sacrament and Ritual: the Making and Meaning of Marriage in Late Medieval and Early Modern England', *Past and Present*, 169 (2000), 63-96; Amussen, *An Ordered Society*, 1; Susan D. Amussen, 'Approaching a New English Social History, 1500-1850', *Historical Journal*, 38 (1995), 679-685; Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England, 1500-1800* (New Haven, 1999).

⁵³ Barbara Harris, 'Women and Politics in Early Tudor England', *The Historical Journal*, 33 (1990), 259-281; Eric Ives, *Anne Boleyn* (Oxford, 1986), viii; Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early-Modern England* (Oxford, 1998), 3; B.S. Capp, *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003), 267; James Daybell, 'Introduction: Rethinking Women and Politics in Early Modern England' in James Daybell (ed.), *Women and Politics in Early Modern England* (Aldershot, 2004), 1-20; Amanda E. Herbert, *Female Alliances: Gender, Identity and Friendship in Early Modern Britain* (New Haven, 2014), 1; O'Day, *The Family and Family Relationships*, 53, 63; Abbot, *Family Ties*, 203; Catherine Bates, *Masculinity, Gender and Identity in the English Renaissance Lyric* (Cambridge, 2007); Jessica Munns and Penny Richards, eds, *Gender, Power and Privilege in Early Modern Europe: 1500-1700* (New York, 2017).

The Parish and the Manor

Another feature that is prominent within gentry studies is a focus on the local community, where members of the Blount family spent most of their time. While formerly, historians were often reluctant to assign a central place to consideration of local affairs, since the 1970s it has been recognised that a very substantial local political culture existed in the sixteenth century, with historians such as Steve Hindle, Wrightson and David Palliser arguing that much of the change of the sixteenth century was driven by political activity at parish level.⁵⁴ D.R. Hainsworth, in relation to the seventeenth century, characterised England as a series of distinct, but overlapping structures, with the centre overlapping a patchwork of county government, which in turn overlapped the smaller polities of the towns and villages.⁵⁵ This often imprecise nature of society boundaries was also highlighted by Charles Phythian-Adams.⁵⁶ The significance of local politics is now well established and the example of the Blounts contributes a useful element to this debate.⁵⁷

In the historiography of this area, the manor is almost universally studied as a medieval unit of governance, while parish studies – which have increased in prominence and scope in the last few decades – tend to assert a growth in the parish's function and importance in the early

⁵⁴ Christopher Dyer, 'The English Medieval Village Community and its Decline', *Journal of British Studies*, 33 (1994), 407; Penry Williams, 'The Crown and the Counties' in Christopher Haigh, *The Reign of Elizabeth I* (Basingstoke, 1984), 125; Steve Hindle, 'A sense of place? Becoming and belonging in the rural parish, 1550-1650' in Alexandra Shepard and Phil Withington (eds.), *Communities in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 2000), 96; David Palliser, 'Introduction: The Parish in Perspective' in Susan Wright (ed.), *Parish, Church and People: Local Studies in Lay Religion* (London, 1987), 23; Keith Wrightson, 'The Politics of the Parish in Early Modern England' in Paul Griffiths, Adam Fox and Steve Hindle (eds.), *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, 1996), 10-12; Wrightson and Levine, *Poverty and Piety*, 2.

⁵⁵ D.R. Hainsworth, *Stewards, Lords and People: The Estate Steward and his World in Later Stuart England* (Cambridge, 1992), 1.

⁵⁶ Charles Phythian-Adams, 'An Agenda for English Local History', in Charles Phythian-Adams (ed.), *Societies, Cultures and Kinship, 1580-1850* (Leicester, 1993), 1-23.

⁵⁷ Patrick Collinson, *De Republica Anglorum: or, History with the Politics Put Back* (Cambridge, 1990).

modern period.⁵⁸ Eamon Duffy's work on the parish of Morebath gives an extraordinarily illuminating account of the parish community but does not explore the interaction between the parish and local manors.⁵⁹ Change to local governance or economics are not considered – albeit that they are seen as outside the scope of Duffy's study. This focus on the parish is a constant feature of local community studies in the early modern period, although the continuing importance of the manor has also been recognised. Anne Mitson, for example, in her study of kinship networks in seventeenth-century south-west Nottinghamshire has identified that, while the parish was an administrative and social unit of profound significance, it was not necessarily of primary importance in social relationships with neighbourhoods centred around manors that shared a common landowner.⁶⁰ Similarly, R.B. Outhwaite considers that people functioned within a number of social units, including households, kinship groups, manors, parishes and villages.⁶¹ Brodie Waddell argues that the manor – which in the medieval period served as the 'principal organ of local government for the vast majority of the English people' – retained its importance in many areas at least until the early seventeenth century.⁶² This study of Blount landholdings and manorial activities in Shropshire, Worcestershire, Oxfordshire, Staffordshire and Derbyshire, demonstrates the continuing administrative, political, social and economic importance of the manor, which can

⁵⁸ John Cooper, 'Centre and localities', in Susan Doran and Norman Jones (eds.), *The Elizabethan World* (London, 2011), 133; Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1998), 11; Christopher Dyer, *An Age of Transition?* (Oxford, 2005), 5; H.R. French, 'Parish Government' in Doran and Jones, *Elizabethan World*, 147; Hindle, 'Sense of place?', 96-114; Margaret Spufford, *Contrasting Communities: English Villagers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1974); Joan Thirsk, 'English rural communities: structures, regularities, and change in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries' in Brian Short (ed.), *The English Rural Community* (Cambridge, 1992), 44-61; Wrightson, 'The Politics of the Parish', 12; Keith Wrightson, *English Society 1580-1680* (London, 2003), 21.

⁵⁹ Eamon Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath* (New Haven, 2001).

⁶⁰ Anne Mitson, 'The Significance of Kinship Networks in the Seventeenth Century: South-West Nottinghamshire' in Phythian-Adams, *Societies, Cultures and Kinship*, 24-76.

⁶¹ R.B. Outhwaite, *The Rise and Fall of the English Ecclesiastical Courts, 1500-1860* (Cambridge, 2006), 1.

⁶² Brodie Waddell, 'Governing England through the Manor Courts, 1550-1850', *Historical Journal*, 55 (2012), 279-315; Christopher Harrison, 'Manor Courts and the Governance of Tudor England' in Christopher Brooks and Michael Lobban (eds.), *Communities and Courts in Britain 1150-1900* (London, 1997), 43-60; James Sharpe, *Crime in Early Modern England 1550-1750* (London, 1998), 25, 85.

be added to the growing body of evidence demonstrative of the manor's continued survival in the post-medieval period.

This study of the Blount family's local political and economic activities considers their position in relation to the growing centralisation of government in this period, a theme pervasive to the study. It is beyond contention that the early modern period saw great change, with it long acknowledged that the state attempted to – and indeed often did – make extensive inroads into the political life of the localities.⁶³ There is, however, a considerable awareness that political disjunction at the end of the medieval period did not lead to a sudden social shift, with the localities remaining centres of considerable political agency, albeit with increasingly direct contact from the state. As such, the Blounts demonstrate ways in which the state and the localities interacted in the period, how this changed over the course of the long sixteenth century and how local political culture was able to continue in importance despite the inroads made by the state in the early modern period.

⁶³ For example, Cooper, 'Centre and localities', 133; Dyer, *Age of Transition?*, 1-5; Geoffrey Elton, *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics and Government vol III: Papers and Reviews 1973-1981* (Cambridge, 1983), 3-57; Steven Gunn, *Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk, 1485-1545* (Oxford, 1988), 226; John Guy, *Tudor England* (Oxford, 1988), 63-4; Christopher Haigh, 'Introduction', in Haigh (ed.), *Reign of Elizabeth I*, 15; Steve Hindle, *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, 1550-1640* (Houndmills, 2000), 5; Steve Hindle, 'A sense of place?', 96; John Guy, 'The rhetoric of counsel in early modern England', in Dale Hoak, *Tudor Political Culture* (Cambridge, 1995), 292-310; Mervyn James, *Society, Politics and Culture: Studies in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1986); MacFarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism*; Antoni Maczak, 'From aristocratic household to princely court: restructuring patronage in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries' in Ronald Asch and Adolf Birke (eds.), *Princes, Patronage, and the Nobility* (Oxford, 1991), 319; Linda Levy Peck, *Court Patronage and Corruption in Early Stuart England* (London, 1990), 3; Andy Wood, *The Memory of the People* (Cambridge, 2013), 12; Wrightson, *English Society*, 21; Sharpe, *Early Modern England*, 103.

Litigation and Conflict

The early modern period was a litigious age, with court records a crucial feature of many family studies.⁶⁴ Some historians, such as Stone, have interpreted this litigiousness as a symptom of social disharmony, but more recent historians like James Sharpe have concluded that – rather than seeking to perpetuate disharmony – litigants used legal suits as a means of resolving conflict, something that is demonstrated by the frequency with which proceedings were settled out of court or where arbitration was attempted.⁶⁵ This has been noted in relation to a variety of courts, for example in the Court of Chivalry ‘litigation could become a substitute for combat’.⁶⁶ Sharpe’s interpretation of the sixteenth-century’s litigiousness as evidence of attempts to resolve disputes is important and one that is borne out by the evidence of the Blount family and the law courts. As well as providing information on local relations, Sharpe also recognises that the law courts can be subject to a wider analysis, with evidence of the conflict-reducing effect of the law courts ‘performing a function both for the state, and for the individual and his or her community’.⁶⁷ Other historians also acknowledge the social function of the courts as being of particular importance.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Steve Hindle, ‘The keeping of the public peace’ in Griffiths, Fox and Hindle, *Experience of Authority*, 218; William Jones, ‘Due process and slow process in the Elizabethan Chancery’ in *American Journal of Legal History*, 6 (1962), 123; Tim Stretton, *Women Waging Law in Elizabethan England* (Cambridge, 1998), 6; J.A. Sharpe, ‘“Such Disagreements Betwix Neighbours”: Litigation and Human Relations in Early Modern England’, in John Bossy (ed.), *Disputes and Settlements: Law and Human Relations in the West* (Cambridge, 1983), 182; James Sharpe, ‘The People and the Law’, in Barry Reay (ed.), *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* (London, 1985), 244-270; C.W. Brooks, *Pettyfoggers and Vipers of the Commonwealth, The ‘Lower Branch’ of the Legal Profession in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1986), 48; Christopher Brooks, *Lawyers, Litigation and English Society Since 1450* (London, 1998), 2.

⁶⁵ Sharpe, ‘The People and the Law’, 253.

⁶⁶ Richard Cust and Andrew Hopper, ‘Duelling and the Court of Chivalry in Early Stuart England’ in Stuart Carroll (ed.), *Cultures of Violence: Interpersonal Violence in Historical Perspective* (Basingstoke, 2007), 156-171.

⁶⁷ Sharpe, ‘Such Disagreements’, 187.

⁶⁸ Joanne Bailey, ‘Voices in Court: Lawyers’ or Litigants’?, in *Historical Research*, 74 no.186 (2001), 392-408; Cynthia Herrup, ‘Law and Morality in Seventeenth-century England’, *Past and Present*, 106 (1985), 103; Christopher Brooks and Michael Lobban, ‘Introduction’ in Brooks and Lobban, *Communities and Courts*, xxi.

While much of the work on the early modern legal system has focussed on the Westminster courts, Christopher Brooks considers that these central courts made up only a tiny proportion of such institutions with most litigants issuing claims in local courts.⁶⁹ Even where they did issue in Westminster, the central courts relied on local infrastructure.⁷⁰ Similarly, two recent studies have concluded that the manor court remained an important forum for local justice – both criminal and civil – in the period.⁷¹ As such, an analysis of the use of the courts is of considerable importance in developing an increasingly nuanced picture of the relationship between the centre and the localities in the period. The evidence of the Blount family in this thesis supports the picture presented by Brookes and Sharpe of a legal system grounded in the localities through its administration and focus, even when the court in which proceedings were issued was a centralised court. The use made of their manor courts – for which a good quantity of material survives – supports views of the continuing importance of the manor. The thesis agrees, too, that litigation does not necessarily suggest disharmony or conflict, with litigants often using the courts in sophisticated ways to promote settlement.

Electoral Competition, Prestige and Parliament

Parliament in the sixteenth century was still viewed as a court and an extension of the royal council, albeit that by the sixteenth century there was a growing sense of it as a body in its own right.⁷² From the mid-twentieth century, A.F. Pollard, John Neale, Stone and others recognised parliament's centrality to government although they viewed this agency through

⁶⁹ Brooks, *Pettyfoggers and Vipers*, 33.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷¹ Waddell, 'Governing England', 279; Harrison, 'Manor Courts', 43.

⁷² Norman Jones, 'Parliament and the Political Society of Elizabethan England' in Hoak, *Tudor Political Culture*, 226; Jennifer Loach, *Parliament and the Crown in the Reign of Mary Tudor* (Oxford, 1986), 201; Conrad Russell, 'Parliamentary history in perspective, 1604-1629', *History*, 61 (1976), 1-27; Conrad Russell, 'Thomas Cromwell's Doctrine of Parliamentary Sovereignty', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 7 (1997), 235-246; Margo Todd, 'Introduction' in Margo Todd (ed.), *Reformation to Revolution: Politics and Religion in Early Modern England* (London, 1995)

the prism of political conflict.⁷³ Geoffrey Elton disputed this, viewing parliament in terms of its legislative function and considering that the aim of parliamentary sessions was agreement rather than contention.⁷⁴ This remains largely accepted today.⁷⁵ Parliament was also one of Elton's points of contact, through which the state was able to extend its reach to the localities, with this conception still accepted by historians.⁷⁶ Elections to parliament have drawn increasing attention from historians in recent years, with the work of Mark A. Kishlansky, for example, identifying that contested elections tended to be rare in the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-centuries and that 'most arose accidentally because of a failure of communication or the tardiness of one entrant or another'.⁷⁷ Nonetheless, it is acknowledged by historians that the central courts provided mechanisms for the resolution of an electoral dispute, while Jennifer Loach has also identified the Sheriff as having the potential, thanks to electoral procedure, to influence the result of the election.⁷⁸ It therefore seems likely that the study of local elections may offer more grounds for scrutiny than has sometimes been assumed.

⁷³ John Neale, *Elizabeth I and her Parliaments 1559-1581* (London, 1953), 16; Lawrence Stone, *The Causes of the English Revolution 1529-1642* (London, 1972), 92; A.F. Pollard, *The Evolution of Parliament*, 2nd edition (London, 1964).

⁷⁴ Elton, *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics III*, 8; Geoffrey Elton, 'Parliament' in Haigh, *Reign of Elizabeth I*, 87; Geoffrey Elton, 'Parliament in the Reign of Elizabeth I' in Todd, *Reformation to Revolution*, 113.

⁷⁵ Paul Cavill, *The English Parliaments of Henry VII 1485-1504* (Oxford, 2009), 4; Pauline Croft, 'The Parliament of England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 7 (1997), 217; Loach, *Parliament in the Reign of Mary Tudor*, 230; M. Graves, *The Tudor Parliaments, Crown, Lords and Commons, 1485-1603* (London, 1985), 5; John Smith Roskell, 'Perspectives in English Parliamentary History', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 46 (1964), 448-75; Sharpe, *Early Modern England*, 9.

⁷⁶ Cavill, *English Parliaments*, 4; Elton, *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics III*, 3,8; Geoffrey Elton, *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics and Government: Papers and Reviews 1946-1972 vol II* (Cambridge, 1974), 7; Elton, 'Parliament in the Reign of Elizabeth I', 113; Croft, 'The Parliament of England', 217; Loach, *Parliament in the Reign of Mary Tudor*, 230.

⁷⁷ Mark Kishlansky, *Parliamentary Selection: Social and Political Choice in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1986), 17.

⁷⁸ Derek Hirst, 'Elections and the Privileges of the House of Commons in the Early Seventeenth Century: Confrontation or Compromise?', *Historical Journal*, 18 (1975), 852-61; Kishlansky, *Parliamentary Selection*, 17; Jennifer Loach, *Parliament Under the Tudors* (Oxford, 1991), 25.

While Blounts were regular members of parliament, their parliamentary activity is little recorded. Where the Blounts can be really useful is in relation to an analysis of the election process. While no evidence survives for the majority of the elections in which family members were involved, in all cases where there is surviving evidence there was a contest. While this evidence is likely to be skewed by the fact that contested elections tended to draw more comment, it does also suggest that elections may have been contested more often than is usually allowed, highlighting the desirability of securing a parliamentary seat. Membership of parliament has long been recognised as an important facet of the gentry's ability to control the local political landscape and, effectively, assisting them in acting as a point of contact with the central government.⁷⁹ As Sharpe notes, 'membership of the lower House was also thought desirable by the politically ambitious, or by those who simply wished to show that they had arrived politically'.⁸⁰ Membership of parliament has been described as one of the defining features of the gentry in the period, something which is borne out by its evident desirability to members of the Blount family.⁸¹ The evidence of electoral conflict advanced here demonstrates the desirability of membership of parliament and throws a light on its role in local prestige and on energetic connections to the central government. It also suggests that disputed elections may merit more enquiry than has in the past been applied to them in this century.

⁷⁹ Nicholas Cooper, *Houses of the Gentry 1480-1680* (New Haven, 1999), 7; Sharpe, *Early Modern England*, 9; Kishlansky, *Parliamentary Selection*, 18.

⁸⁰ Sharpe, *Early Modern England*, 9

⁸¹ Jane Whittle and Elizabeth Griffiths, *Consumption and Gender in the Early Seventeenth Century Household* (Oxford, 2012), 15.

Military Retaining and Patronage

Paul Hammer and Steven Gunn have identified the centrality of war to sixteenth-century England, in spite of the reduction in civil strife after the fifteenth century, albeit that they consider that the military has not received an adequate focus from historians.⁸² Historians recognise some important changes in the way that the military was mustered in the period, with the importance of noble retinues declining in favour of a growing crown affinity and increasing use of the militia.⁸³ Patronage relationships changed in the long sixteenth century, with historians recognising a constriction in the inner circle at court under Henry VII and Henry VIII, for example, with the privy chamber serving to limit access to the monarch in different ways.⁸⁴ Court patronage had, of course, always served as a link between the king and the localities, with the trickle-down effect of crown patronage evident throughout the period under review here.⁸⁵ In the medieval period, relationships between patrons and clients were usually expressed in military terms, making it essential to consider patronage alongside the military. The Blounts' continuing participation in noble retinues can be seen right up to the end of the sixteenth century, but they also played an increasing role in the militia. As such, patronage remained of considerable importance to members of the Blount family, albeit that in the military sphere at least – the crown did increasingly take direct control. The very significant role that patronage played in the Blount family's lives, both as patrons and clients,

⁸² Paul E.J. Hammer, *War, Government and Society in Tudor England, 1544-1604* (Houndmills, 2003); Steven Gunn, *The English People at War in the Age of Henry VIII* (Oxford, 2018).

⁸³ Simon Adams, 'The Patronage of the Crown in Elizabethan Politics: The 1590s in Perspective' in John Guy (ed.), *The Reign of Elizabeth I: Court and Culture in the Last Decade* (Cambridge, 1995), 31; Charles Cruickshank, *Elizabeth's Army* (Oxford, 1946), 5; William Huse Dunham, 'Lord Hastings' Indentured Retainers 1461-1483', *Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 39 (1955), 9; John Jeremy Goring, 'The Military Obligations of the English People 1511-1558' (Queen Mary's, Univ of London, PhD thesis, 1955), 7; Steven Gunn, David Grummitt and Hans Cools (eds.), *War, State, and Society in England and the Netherlands 1477-1559* (Oxford, 2007), 6; Helen Miller, *Henry VIII and the English Nobility* (Oxford, 1986), 134.

⁸⁴ Miller, *Henry VIII and the English Nobility*, 89; David Starkey, 'Court, Council, and Nobility in Tudor England' in Asch and Birke, *Princes, Patronage and the Nobility*, 175-204; David Starkey, *Reign of Henry VIII* (London, 2002), 84.

⁸⁵ Peck, *Court Patronage*, 3.

throughout the entirety of the long sixteenth century is demonstrated, albeit that there were changes to the nature of the relationship – particularly in relation to the military aspects of the role. The example of the Blounts questions the easy assumptions that can be made about the shifting patterns of military preparation.

The Reformation

While the late medieval church was once viewed as in decline, research since the late twentieth century has demonstrated that it was in many respects popular and vibrant.⁸⁶

Allowing for some measure of grass-roots evangelicalism, it is frequently held that political pressure largely drove the changes made to state religion.⁸⁷ Current thinking on the Reformation is cautious of imposing any single interpretation, however, emphasising gradualism, diversity, and the importance of religious experience within communities and on an individual level.⁸⁸ The analysis of religious change in the period before 1558 is fraught with difficulty when historians attempt to move beyond a study of the political or official position. Private devotion is notoriously hard to identify.⁸⁹ It was not unusual for families which would later be prominently Catholic to retain office in the early Reformation period, take the Oath of Supremacy or solicit former monastic property, such as Sir Francis Englefield, although he had joined the future Mary I's household by 1551 and later served on

⁸⁶ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (Oxford, 2005); Christopher Harper-Bill, 'Dean Colet's convocation sermon and the pre-Reformation church in England', in *History*, 73 (1998), 191; George Bernard, *The Late Medieval English Church* (New Haven, 2012), ix; Peter Heath, *The English Parish Clergy on the Eve of the Reformation* (London, 1969), 187; Robert Whiting, *The Blind Devotion of the People* (Cambridge, 1990), 1, 151; Robert Swanson, *Church and Society in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 1989), vii;

⁸⁷ Alec Ryrie, 'Counting Sheep, Counting Shepherds: The Problem of Allegiance in the English Reformation' in Peter Marshall and Alec Ryrie. (eds.), *The Beginnings of English Protestantism* (Cambridge, 2002), 84; A.G. Dickens, 'The Early Expansion of Protestantism in England, 1520-1558' in Peter Marshall (ed.), *The Impact of the English Reformation 1500-1640* (London, 1997), 87; Nicholas Tyacke, 'Introduction: Re-Thinking the "English Reformation"' in Nicholas Tyacke, *England's Long Reformation 1500-1800* (London, 1998), 7-11.

⁸⁸ Peter Marshall, *Heretics and Believers, A History of the English Reformation* (New Haven, 2017), xi; Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford, 2013), 6; Ethan Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation* (Cambridge, 2003), 1, 8.

⁸⁹ Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath*, 67.

her privy council.⁹⁰ Early in Elizabeth's reign, it has been argued that 'in many cases Catholics were able to hold high office because there simply were not enough suitably qualified Anglicans'.⁹¹ In the period before the Elizabethan Settlement even the terms to be applied to individuals are problematic, with 'Catholic', 'Protestant', 'Traditional', 'Reformer' and 'Evangelical' all loaded and anachronistic.⁹² Christian Humanism, too, defies any such pigeonholing with its adherents in the reign of Henry VIII later spanning the full width of the religious spectrum.⁹³ In this confused and complicated period it is important to consider, where possible, the personal faith of individuals and their activities to better understand responses to the changes to religion wrought by the state and, indeed, this is commonly a focus of gentry studies. The Blounts, for whom a good quantity of records relating to their religious activities in the period survive, make an excellent case study. The picture that emerges is one of widespread acceptance of the new *status quo* during the earliest years of the Reformation, something that would seem at odds with evidence of the family's faith post-1558.

The work of John Bossy in the 1960s and 1970s revolutionised historians' understanding of English Catholicism in the Elizabethan period, although his and other scholars' definition of the Catholic community – which focussed almost entirely on recusancy - is now recognised to be far too narrow, with Alexandra Walsham's work on church papists particularly illuminating in increasing understanding of the breadth of responses to the Elizabethan

⁹⁰ Tony Hadland, *Thames Valley Papists* (1992), 15, 17; Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath*, 91.

⁹¹ Hadland, *Thames Valley Papists*, 25.

⁹² John Bossy, 'Some Elementary Forms of Durkheim', *Past and Present*, 95 (May 1982), 17; Maria Dowling, *Humanism in the Age of Henry VIII* (London, 1986), 121; Peter Marshall and Alec Ryrie 'Introduction: Protestantisms and their Beginnings' in Marshall and Ryrie, *Beginnings of English Protestantism*, 5; Peter Marshall, 'The Naming of Protestant England', *Past and Present*, 214 (2012), 89.

⁹³ Peter Marshall, 'Evangelical Conversion in the Reign of Henry VIII' in Marshall and Ryrie, *Beginnings of English Protestantism*, 30; James McConica, *English Humanists and Reformation Politics under Henry VIII and Edward VI* (Oxford, 1965), 2; Paul O'Grady, *Henry VIII and the Conforming Catholics* (Collegeville, 1990), 65; Lucy Wooding, *Rethinking Catholicism in Reformation England* (Oxford, 2000), 17.

church settlement made by English Catholics.⁹⁴ As the definition of a Catholic has broadened, so too has the range of work on Catholics in the period.⁹⁵ Members of the Blount family (in most branches) viewed themselves as Catholic in the Elizabethan period. Despite this evident concordance of belief, the family demonstrates a startlingly broad range of responses to pressures against their faith. In a period where to be openly Catholic meant a risk of persecution, it is at first glance surprising that members of the family were able to maintain local and national office and a situation worthy of further consideration. In a detailed analysis of the family's religion in the Elizabethan period, this study adds to the study of individual Catholic families, as well as providing very important detail to the practical implications of being an Elizabethan Catholic and the wide range of strategies employed by them.

This thesis, in line with many gentry studies of the period, follows a thematic structure. Chapter 1 will look at the family's local and economic interests, including an analysis of their local political role and way that gentry status was constructed and recognised. Chapter 2 will look at the family's involvement in the law courts, focussing on the choices of legal forum and the way that justice was administered in the localities. Chapter 3 considers parliament, with an analysis of the election process and the reasons why an individual might seek election. Chapter 4 discusses patronage and the military, with a consideration of the changes

⁹⁴ J.C.H. Aveling, *The Handle and the Axe* (London, 1976), 61; John Bossy, 'The Character of Elizabethan Catholicism', *Past and Present*, 21 (1961), 39-59; John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community 1570-1850* (London, 1975), 11; Christopher Haigh, *Reformation and Resistance in Tudor Lancashire* (Cambridge, 1975); Peter Holmes, *Resistance and Compromise: The Political Thought of the Elizabethan Catholics* (Cambridge, 1982), 81; Marshall and Scott, 'Introduction: The Catholic Gentry'; Arnold Pritchard, *Catholic Loyalty in Elizabethan England* (Chapel Hill, 1979), 4; Alexandra Walsham, *Church Papists* (Woodbridge, 1999).

⁹⁵ For example, Christopher Highley, *Catholics Writing the Nation in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, 2008); Marshall and Scott, 'Introduction: The Catholic Gentry in English Society'; Questier, *Catholicism and Community*; Alison Shell, *Oral Culture and Catholicism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2007); Lucy Underwood, *Childhood, Youth and Religious Dissent in Post-Reformation England* (Basingstoke, 2014).

in the way troops were mustered in the period and how this affected the Blounts. Chapter 5 looks at the family's religion up to 1558, with chapter 6 considering their religion in the Elizabethan period. While the conclusions of my study are specific to the Blounts, they contribute towards elucidating the lives of the gentry in the long sixteenth century, making a significant contribution to gentry studies and the social, religious and political history of the period.

Chapter 1: The Manor, the Parish and Local Political Activities

A very substantial local political culture existed in the sixteenth century, as local studies have demonstrated over the last few decades.¹ Local studies provide a crucial framework for gentry studies, while studies of a community or communities are also common, with a focus on change and the responses made to such change often central.² The long sixteenth century saw considerable change in the local area, notably in relation to land enclosure, the increasing size of holdings in some areas and growing mineral exploitation of the land, although the extent of this change varied due to local factors.³ The identification of these kinds of change in the localities has proved illuminating for many gentry and community studies.⁴ The nature and extent of change in the local area is considered here through the Blounts and the communities in which they lived.

While local historians frequently focus on communities, the terms involved can be problematic. Community has been defined in various ways, including as a consciousness of shared interests, concerns or values that distinguish a group from outsiders.⁵ Similarly,

¹ Dyer, 'The English Medieval Village Community', 407; Williams, 'The Crown and the Counties', 125; Wrightson, 'Politics of the Parish', 12; Anthony P. Cohen, 'Belonging: The Experience of Culture' in Anthony P. Cohen (ed.), *Belonging: Identity and Social Organisation in British Rural Cultures* (Manchester, 1982), 1-17; Marilyn Strathern, 'The Village as an Idea: Constructs of Village-ness in Elmdon, Essex' in Cohen, *Belonging, Identity and Social Organisation*, 247-277; Spufford, *Contrasting Communities*, xx.

² Phythian-Adams, 'An Agenda for English Local History', 1; Broad, *Transforming English Rural Society*, 2.

³ Keith Wrightson, 'Aspects of Social Differentiation in Rural England, c.1580-1660', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 5 (1977), 33-47; Brian Short, 'The evolution of contrasting communities within rural England' in Short, *English Rural Community*, 20; Thirsk, 'English rural communities', 44; Matthew Clark, 'The Gentry, the Commons, and the Politics of Common Right in Enfield, c.1558-c.1603', *Historical Journal*, 54 (2011), 609-629.

⁴ For example, Broad, *Transforming English Rural Society*; James, *Family, Lineage & Civil Society*; Broadway, 'No Historie So Meete'.

⁵ Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 268.

society is a complex term. Charles Phythian-Adams considered that to study society it is necessary to look at the local area, with even the state characterised as a series of inter-linked local societies held together by social norms, laws and convention.⁶ His contention that it is impossible to write a social history of England at a national level is an interesting one and is supported by studies which emphasise the importance of the local to social history.⁷ These are frequently ethnographical in approach, such as Marilyn Strathern's work on the modern village of Elmdon in which she recognised that, even within a village, there were many ways that a community could be perceived to exist.⁸ Margaret Spufford carrying out work in Cambridgeshire, considered the way that people thought about their local communities and the changes of the early modern period, with her work particularly focussing on lower ranking members of the community.⁹ The emphasis these works place on the flexibility of community and the fact that any community is made up of sentient individuals is illuminating. It has long been recognised by historians that an individual could be a member of several communities at any one time, something that is similarly emphasised in this thesis.¹⁰

Historians, such as Steve Hindle, Keith Wrightson, Paul Griffiths and David Palliser have identified the parish as the political unit of fundamental importance to the people of early

⁶ Phythian-Adams, 'An Agenda for English Local History', 4.

⁷ Phythian-Adams, 'An Agenda for English Local History', 5; Cohen, 'Belonging', 1. Strathern, 'The Village as an Idea', 247-277.

⁸ Strathern, 'The Village as an Idea', 258. Also, see Hans Medick and David Warren Sabean (eds.), *Interest and Emotion: Essays in the Study of Family and Kinship* (Cambridge, 1984).

⁹ Spufford, *Contrasting Communities*, xx.

¹⁰ D.R. Hainsworth, *Stewards, Lords and People: The Estate Steward and his World in Later Stuart England* (Cambridge, 1992), 1; Charles Phythian-Adams, 'An Agenda for English Local History', in Charles Phythian-Adams (ed.), *Societies, Cultures and Kinship, 1580-1850* (Leicester, 1993), 1-23.

modern England, with its centrality acknowledged by contemporaries.¹¹ While it sometimes (but not always) occupied the same physical space as the parish or the village, the manor was a distinct local political unit, albeit that the divisions between the three could be imprecise.¹² The medieval manor is synonymous with feudalism, which can be defined as a stratified social system structured around land ownership in which rights and obligations were owed by tenants to the lord of the manor, who in turn owed service to the Crown.¹³ The debate on feudalism and its continuation into the early modern period is long and far from decided. The manor was once believed to have been in decline, eclipsed by the rising prominence of the parish.¹⁴ Historians have however increasingly recognised that the early modern manor was not necessarily in decline. In 2012 Brodie Waddell noted that, while evidence of decline should not be dismissed, it should also not be overstated, with evidence of manor court business remaining vibrant in many areas and local people adapting the administrative functions of the manor to suit their needs, while it was also an institution through which local people could create their own rules to govern their daily life.¹⁵ Christopher Harrison also considers that the manor court was the most important village institution until at least the mid-seventeenth century.¹⁶ Peter Large's study of Ombersley in Worcestershire, too, highlights the manor's continuing vitality into the early eighteenth century.¹⁷ Other works have drawn similar conclusions with it now widely recognised that the manor continued to hold local political, economic and social importance, alongside the parish and village, with

¹¹ Hindle, 'Sense of place?', 96; Wrightson, 'Politics of the Parish, 10-11; Wrightson and Levine, *Poverty and Piety*, 2; Paul Griffiths, 'Surveying the people' in Keith Wrightson, Keith (ed.), *A Social History of England 1500-1750* (Cambridge, 2017), 39-59.

¹² Peter Large, 'Rural Society and Agricultural Change: Ombersley 1580-1700' in John Chartres and David Hey (eds.), *English Rural Society 1500-1800: Essays in Honour of Joan Thirsk* (Cambridge, 1990), 105-138; Amussen, 'Approaching a New English Social History', 684; Phythian-Adams, 'An Agenda for English Local History', 19.

¹³ Dyer, *Standards of Living*, 11.

¹⁴ John Malcolm William Bean, *From Lord to Patron: Lordship in Late Medieval England* (Manchester, 1989); Dyer, *Age of Transition?*, 1; Cooper, 'Centre and Localities', 133; French, 'Parish Government', 147.

¹⁵ Waddell, 'Governing England', 301, 309.

¹⁶ Harrison, 'Manor Courts', 50

¹⁷ Large, 'Rural Society and Agricultural Change', 105-138.

contemporary ideas of local community potentially encompassing all three, particularly given the porosity of their boundaries and the overlapping nature of these units of local governance.¹⁸

The continuing importance of the manor and its importance within the local community is observable in works on the manor house, which have been characterised as expressing the gentry's dominance of local society and as being the centre of 'largely self-contained communities', as well as effectively as business enterprises.¹⁹ Unsurprisingly, analysis of manor houses – and changes in the way they were characterised and administered - has been central to many gentry studies. Broad, for example, in relation to the Verney family, considered that the manor house was integral to Tudor and Stuart rural life, with it only becoming inaccessible to local farmers and villagers in the eighteenth century.²⁰ Alice T. Friedman's study of the Willoughbys of the Elizabethan Wollaton Hall has drawn similar conclusions, with the hall built to occupy a central place in the local community.²¹ Friedman considers that the late sixteenth century marked a change in the way that the gentry structured their lives and those of their households, with a decline in hospitality in the manor house towards tenants, as well as a decline in retaining and a movement for younger sons and lesser

¹⁸ Hainsworth, *Stewards, Lords and People*, 3; Sharpe, 'The People and the Law', 246; C.G.A. Clay, *Economic Expansion and Social Change: England 1500-1700, vol I: People, Land and Towns* (Cambridge, 1984), 64; Rodney Howard Hilton, *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1975), 28; Hindle, 'Sense of place?', 96; Craig Muldrew, 'From a 'Light Cloak' to an 'Iron Cage': Historical Changes in the Relation Between Community and Individualism' in Shepard and Withington, *Communities*, 161; Richard Smith, 'Some Issues Concerning Families and Their Property in Rural England 1250-1800' in Richard Smith (ed.), *Land, Kinship and Life-Cycle* (Cambridge, 1984); Wrightson, 'Politics of the Parish', 12; Ian Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability: Social Relations in Elizabethan London* (Cambridge, 1991), 82. 'Community' is, of course, a problematic word to define. It has been defined at its broadest as 'something done as an expression of collective identity by groups of people' and this is the definition followed here (Phil Withington and Alexandra Shepard, 'Introduction: Communities in Early Modern England' in Shepard and Withington, *Communities in Early Modern England*, 1).

¹⁹ Cooper, *Houses of the Gentry*, 3; Whittle and Griffiths, *Consumption and Gender*, 14.

²⁰ Broad, *Transforming English Rural Society*, 3.

²¹ Alice T. Friedman, *House and Household in Elizabethan England: Wollaton Hall and the Willoughby Family* (Chicago and London, 1989), 11.

gentry, who had previously served as upper servants, towards increasing commercial and professional activities in towns.²² For Friedman, a change in the household marked a change in county society and gentry culture, which she observed as occurring after the lifetime of the Elizabethan Sir Francis Willoughby, who built the hall and who saw himself as a central figure in his local community, serving as a justice of the peace and sheriff.²³ In most studies of the household in the early modern period, historians observe an increasing separation between the gentry and the residents of their manors, although they tend to date this change to later than the sixteenth century. It has also long been recognised by historians that the gentry were prepared to diversify their exploitation of their estates, with the extraction of minerals such as coal growing in economic importance to the gentry in the period.²⁴

Studies of the continuance of the manor and the importance of the manor house, naturally lead on to a consideration of the role of the gentry and social stratification in the period. Lawrence Stone considered early modern English society to be highly stratified, with the boundaries between ‘very distinct status groups and classes’ rigid, although not entirely impermeable.²⁵ Certainly, contemporaries were able to make fine distinctions in assessing the social status of others.²⁶ Conceptions of social mobility and the way that status was defined have become considerably more nuanced in recent decades. Alexandra Shepard considers that, to the people of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was frequently worth in moveable goods that mattered, with social estimation of an individual’s reputation or credibility rooted in these assessments, as well as the way that people placed themselves

²² Ibid., 180.

²³ Ibid., 183.

²⁴ Sharpe, *Early Modern England*, 160-1.

²⁵ Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage*, 9.

²⁶ Cust and Hopper, ‘Duelling’, 161; Keith Wrightson, ‘Estates, Degrees and Sorts: Changing Perceptions of Society in Tudor and Stuart England’, in Penelope J. Corfield, ed., *Language, History and Class* (Oxford, 1991), 32.

socially in relation to others.²⁷ While houses and landownership have been characterised as proclaiming individual's gentility in the period, few historians would now consider this the sole defining marker of a class under considerable expansion in the period.²⁸ The gentry had always spanned a broad spectrum of wealth, with both the landed classes and their younger sons admitted, while historians frequently sub-divide the class into the upper, middle and lower gentry.²⁹ Jane Whittle and Elizabeth Griffiths, for example, considered that lineage, title, land, wealth and office were defining features of the gentry in the early seventeenth century, as was the fact that someone maintained the appearance of a gentleman.³⁰ The Blounts, while universally described as members of the gentry in the period, spanned a very broad spectrum of wealth and, as such, they provide a good case study to consider further definitions of gentility. It will be shown below, particularly in relation to the Blounts of Eckington, that a residual gentry status based on lineage and connections to the nobility and other members of the gentry could exist for some generations, even where the individual concerned held no freehold land. The example of the Blounts therefore supports the work of Shepard, Whittle and Griffiths and others in identifying a very nuanced assessment of social status which was both negotiated in the period and was reliant on a broad range of factors, albeit that landownership was of considerable importance, particularly in relation to the upper gentry.

This assessment of social worth, of course, did not stop at the gentry, with local society highly stratified throughout. The Blounts were primarily resident within their local

²⁷ Alexandra Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself: Worth, Status, and the Social Order in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2015), 1-2, 10, 31-2.

²⁸ Cooper, *Houses of the Gentry*, 5; Sharpe, *Early Modern England*, 161-2; Whittle and Griffiths, *Consumption and Gender*, 15.

²⁹ Cooper, *Houses of the Gentry*, 6; Sharpe, *Early Modern England*, 161-2; Whittle and Griffiths, *Consumption and Gender*, 15.

³⁰ Whittle and Griffiths, *Consumption and Gender*, 15.

communities and, as such, it is pertinent to consider the way that these communities functioned and the level of contact between the different social levels in the parish, manor or village. Several historians have identified an increase in social stratification in the early modern period, with yeomen, who dominated local political appointments, rising in wealth and number.³¹ This has led to suggestions of increasing tension and hostility (which will be considered here in the following chapter on law courts), albeit that it is usually acknowledged that there was also a clear sense of mutual obligations within communities, neighbourliness and affection.³² Such ideas are of profound importance in the way that local communities are perceived. As Helen French and Jonathan Barry have identified, ‘in practice in early modern England power was distributed quite widely, even within a society containing highly unequal hierarchies of wealth and status’, with networks of power widespread and dense.³³ As such, there was scope for agency by even the poorest members of the community, through networks of kinship or friendship, while local government has also been identified as relying on the cooperation of the governed, something that required communal solidarity to be maintained.³⁴ This is something that a close analysis of the communities in which members of the Blount family lived can assist in identifying, with it clear that their communities – although highly stratified – did allow for some access to power, albeit indirect, for most members of society.

Ideas of change in the local community and the continuing importance of the manor invite a consideration of the role of increasing centralisation, which was a key element of government

³¹ Sharpe, *Early Modern England*, 93; Alexandra Shepard and Judith Spicksley, ‘Worth, Age, and Social Status in Early Modern England’, *The Economic History Review*, 64 (2011), 493-530.

³² Sharpe, *Early Modern England*, 96.

³³ Helen French and Jonathan Barry (eds.), *Identity and Agency in English Society, 1500-1800* (London, 2004), 12-13.

³⁴ Amussen, *An Ordered Society*, 136.

policy since the medieval period.³⁵ Historians' views of this process have become increasingly nuanced. For Hindle, for example, it was only with the Elizabethan Poor Law that centralised authority achieved some of the sweeping powers it claimed over the localities – albeit that this too was delegated to local authority for its implementation.³⁶ Even the reintroduction of Lord Lieutenancies in some areas which, as Neil Younger has argued, 'can be seen as marking a significant change in the Elizabethan regime's relations with the counties', were still heavily reliant on local deputies and other local infrastructure and personnel, while posts were frequently left unfilled and counties (including Shropshire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire) unrepresented.³⁷ The sixteenth-century Crown is widely recognised as reliant on local government to implement its policies and maintain order, albeit that growing political centralisation can be seen through the increase in local office.³⁸ Indeed, Andy Wood has emphasised the local as the most important arena for social change.³⁹ The gentry's role, as the direct contact between the centre and the localities, was crucial in this and it is an essential feature of any gentry study to consider local political roles.⁴⁰ This is a major feature of this chapter, situating the Blounts both socially and politically within their local communities and beyond, with their involvement in the leading county appointments of

³⁵ Elton, *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics III*, 3-57; Dyer, *Age of Transition?*, 1; Hindle, *State and Social Change*, 5.

³⁶ Hindle, *State and Social Change*, 172.

³⁷ Hindle, *State and Social Change*, 172; Neil Younger, *War and Politics in the Elizabethan Counties* (Manchester, 2012), 19; Williams, 'Crown and the Counties', 126; W. Keith Williams, 'The Military Functions of the Office of Lord Lieutenant, 1585 to 1603, with Special Emphasis on Lord Burghley' (Univ of Leicester, PhD thesis, 2002); Gladys Scott Thomson, *Lords Lieutenants in the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1923). Gladys Scott Thomson, 'The origin and growth of the office of Deputy-Lieutenant', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5 (1922), 152 notes of the Lords Lieutenants that 'the scheme inevitably depended for success upon the support given to the Lieutenant by the gentry of his district'. Phillips compiled a list of lords lieutenants for Shropshire, which demonstrate the largely local character of the appointments. The Earl of Shrewsbury, for example, served from 1547 (W. Phillips, 'The Lords-Lieutenant of Shropshire', *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*, 3rd series volume 3 (1903), 333.

³⁸ Williams, 'Crown and Counties', 125; Sharpe, *Early Modern England*, 168; Wrightson and Levine, *Poverty and Piety*, 8; Andy Wood, *Riot, Rebellion and Popular Politics in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, 2002), 36; Sharpe, *Early Modern England*, 168; Thomson, 'Office of Deputy-Lieutenant', 152. This can be seen in Staffordshire for 1585-1590, for example, where the Earl of Shrewsbury held the role (John Christopher Sainty, 'Lieutenants of counties, 1585-1642', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, Special Supplement 8 (1970), 32). He was already a major landowner in the area.

³⁹ Wood, *Memory of the People*, 12.

⁴⁰ Sharpe, *Early Modern England*, 169.

Sheriff or Justice of the Peace a particular focus of enquiry. It will be shown that such appointments, although centrally made, often demonstrate more about local reputation and prowess than increasing centralisation, with the local political culture of paramount importance in the lives of the Blounts as county gentry in the period.

This chapter is divided into two main sections. The first reviews the evidence for the Blounts' economic activity, and discusses the continuing importance of the manor, both economically and politically, and the ways in which gentry status was negotiated and perceived. The second section analyses the family's local political and patronage roles. The nature of the family's gentry status and the broad spectrum of gentility will also be considered, alongside the family's role within the local community and their service as Justices of the Peace and Sheriffs. The chapter will argue that the Blounts can only be properly understood within their local context, and in terms of their many-layered interconnections with the local community. It will suggest that gentry status was conditioned by social attitudes as well as economic circumstances, and that office-holding functioned at every level of local society to sustain communal stability. The local community was an indispensable part of this gentry family's identity, occupations and ambitions.

The Blount Family's Economic Activity

Agriculture

In the sixteenth century there was a particular concentration of Blount family manors within a few miles of each other on the Shropshire/Worcestershire border (Mamble, Mawley, Kinlet, Astley and Kidderminster), as well as a wider spread throughout the West Midlands, including Iwer, Mapledurham and Deddington in Oxfordshire and a substantial Staffordshire

holding brought to the family in the 1490s by John Blount of Kinlet's marriage to Katherine Peshall. Surviving manorial records are patchy, but it is possible to piece together information on their agricultural interests in some areas during the period.

Members of the family in the medieval period were economically reliant on agriculture. This can be seen at Deddington in Oxfordshire, a parish which contained several manors, including Blount's Manor, which passed to John Blount, the younger brother of Humphrey Blount of Kinlet in 1442 and had hitherto been that branch of the family's principal seat, remaining in the family until it was sold in 1498.⁴¹ Blount's Manor was small, containing only five messuages, 300 acres of arable land, 16 acres of meadow, 50 acres of pasture and two acres of wood, suggesting mixed farming. Manor court records dealt with agricultural disputes, including the pasture of sheep on the common, while church court records also demonstrate the primarily agricultural nature of local concerns, with Deddington residents complaining of the theft of rabbits, cows being driven over cereal crops and the payment of eggs or malt as tithes.⁴² Contemporary probate inventories provide a similar picture, with the modest estates of manorial tenants dominated by agricultural equipment and livestock.⁴³ There is no evidence of industry in the manor or parish.

⁴¹ *Calendar of the Fine Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office, vol XVII: Henry VI 1437-1445* (London, 1937) [hereafter *CFR 17*], 283; H.M. Colvin, *A History of Deddington Oxfordshire* (London, 1963), 1, 120.

⁴² Colvin, *Deddington*, 69; *Oxford Church Courts Depositions 1542-1550*, ed. Jack Howard-Drake (Oxford, 1991), 12; *Oxford Church Courts Depositions 1570-1574*, ed. Jack Howard-Drake (Oxford, 1993), 39; *Oxford Church Courts Depositions 1581-1586*, ed. Jack Howard-Drake (Oxford, 1994), 8; *Oxford Church Courts Depositions 1592-1596*, ed. Jack Howard-Drake (Oxford, 1998), 34.

⁴³ For example, the Elizabethan inventories of Deddington husbandmen Anthony Cowper and John Coxe record livestock, crops and agricultural implements as their main assets; see *Household and Farm Inventories in Oxfordshire, 1550-1590*, ed. M.A. Havinden (London, 1965), 71, 117.

A similar picture is provided by Kinlet in Shropshire, which was inherited by the Blounts in the fifteenth century. Kinlet parish contained the manors of Kinlet and Earnwood and part of Highley manor. Throughout the medieval period the proportion of the lord's demesne in Kinlet manor relative to the tenanted area increased substantially. At Domesday, one quarter of the available land was demesne, but with woodland clearance this had doubled in size by the fourteenth century, with the tenanted area remaining the same.⁴⁴ With other additions, including two parks, a garden, water mill, meadow and pasture, by 1304 the tenanted area only made up one quarter of the manor's extent, demonstrating an economic focus on agricultural production rather than rents in the period.⁴⁵ References to ploughlands and pasture suggest that mixed farming was carried out, to be expected due to the predominantly poorly draining soils found in the local area which favour a 'cattle-corn economy'.⁴⁶ Kinlet manor suffered a population crash associated with the Black Death, with the 1354 *Inquisition Post Mortem* for Edmund de Cornwall, lord of Kinlet, recording rents worth only 5s a year.⁴⁷ Neighbouring Highley suffered a similar collapse, with two carucates of arable land which had previously been valued at 60s a year considered in May 1349 to be impossible to value 'because of the pestilence'.⁴⁸ Rents there fell from £4 per year to 10s. The collapse was not permanent with the 1381 poll tax return showing a population recovery, with all adult men other than the lord, Brian de Cornwall, and eight servants listed as either farmers or labourers.⁴⁹ Similar patterns can be seen at Highley, where forest land continued to be cleared in the late fourteenth century, indicating a demand for farmland.⁵⁰ Mixed farming continued at Kinlet, with sixteenth and seventeenth-century wills recording a wide range of livestock,

⁴⁴ *Kinlet: The Life and Times of a Shropshire Village* (Kinlet History Group, 2007), 12, 59.

⁴⁵ The National Archives [hereafter TNA], C133/115.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

⁴⁷ TNA C135/126.

⁴⁸ *A History of the County of Shropshire, volume 4: Agriculture*, eds. G.C.Baugh and C.R. Elrington (Victoria County History, Oxford, 1989) [hereafter *VCH Shropshire 4*], 75.

⁴⁹ *The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381, Part 2: Lincolnshire-Westmorland*, ed. Carolyn Fenwick (Oxford, 2001), 409.

⁵⁰ *VCH Shropshire 4*, 80.

cereal crops and agricultural implements. The agricultural focus persisted until at least the start of the nineteenth century when the local vicar recorded that all but a handful of parish inhabitants were employed in husbandry.⁵¹ It was an agricultural community.

At neighbouring Earnwood, which was held by the earls of March and, from the mid-fifteenth century, the Crown, manorial accounts indicate a change in focus, with rents making up an increasingly large portion of the manor's income, as opposed to direct farming of the demesne. While assize rents from the late fourteenth until the mid-sixteenth century (a period for which accounts survive) remained almost entirely static, indicating little change to the traditionally tenanted portion of the manor, a number of new tenancies were granted from the demesne at a market rent and only for term of life, ensuring that such land did not become saddled, effectively, with a sitting tenant and a below-market rent.⁵² A similar process has been noted, too, by John Broad in relation to the Verneys, who identified the gradual alteration of tenures towards modern contractual arrangements in the early modern period – a process that eventually transformed the village in which they lived.⁵³ Kinlet's manorial accounts do not survive, but the case of Southall and Southall v. Blount (1552), in which Sir George Blount of Kinlet was claimed to have attempted to disrupt the hereditary succession

⁵¹ Several sixteenth and seventeenth-century wills survive from Kinlet. Approximately half refer to agricultural implements, crops or animals (Hereford Diocesan Record Office [hereafter HDRO]: wills of Richard Barker 1587, Thomas Adams 1590, Thomas Baker 1609, Anne Baker 1611, Thomas Butler 1614, Thomas Cratford 1571, TNA: PROB 11/60/261 (Thomas Southall, 1578), PROB 11/65/162 (George Pigott, 1583), PROB 11/89/142 (John Oseland, 1597), PROB 11/114/341 (Thomas Cantrell, 1609)). Those that do not tend to be shorter and less detailed documents (HDRO: Thomas Butler (1545), John Butler (1548), Eleanor Dallowe (1580), Elizabeth Winwood (1580), Anne Dallowe (1583), Isabel Carpenter (1586), John Burnell (1590s), Richard Dallowe (1592), William Crafte (1598), Richard Winwood (1605), Joyce Burnell (1606), TNA: PROB 11/58/215 (James Holway, 1576), PROB 11/81/102 (Thomas Adams, yeoman, 1593), PROB 11/124/549 (Leonard Indkyns gentleman, 1614), PROB 11/143/657 (Henry Hill, 1624)) making analysis more problematic. The will of yeoman, Roger Millmax (1606), for example, only included cash bequests (TNA PROB 11/107/408). The Dallow family leased arable and pastoral land in Earnwood at the time of the 1565 Survey of Earnwood (TNA SP12/36/1), but do not mention agriculture in surviving family wills.

⁵² TNA SC6/966/12; TNA SC6/Hen VII/493; TNA SC6/Hen VII/494; TNA SC6/Hen VIII/2954.

⁵³ Broad, *Transforming English Rural Society*, 1.

of tenanted land might suggest a similar picture, although, notably, the case involved George Blount attempting to increase the rent on already tenanted land rather than reducing the size of the demesne in order to gain rental income.⁵⁴ There is better evidence of a continuity of practice by Kinlet's lords from the medieval period and throughout the sixteenth century. George Blount (d.1581) farmed his own demesne. He kept over one hundred sheep in Kinlet Park and sixty pigs in Kinlet woods in the mid-1550s.⁵⁵ George's livestock regularly broke out of the insufficiently fenced park and woodland, with the animals eating the crops and pasture of neighbouring tenants. William Warton of Bardeley, who was a yeoman neighbour of Kinlet Park claimed that such incursions had been happening for twelve years by 1555, causing him a loss of at least £10 per year based on the damage by the sheep alone, indicating the longstanding and substantial nature of George's agricultural activities.⁵⁶ The process of adoption of more modern contractual tenancies has, however, been identified as a long one, developing over the centuries from 1500 and, as such, George's activities can suggest that he was still at an early stage in the process, as other gentry studies have identified.⁵⁷

In contrast to Kinlet, farming Earnwood's demesne had never been a major undertaking. While, in April 1381, 80 of the 200 acres of demesne were sown with wheat, late fourteenth-century accounts indicate that much of the labour due to the lord by tenants was not required, with many paying 4s in lieu of the ploughing work they owed during winter and Lent.⁵⁸ One-third of the hay produced on the manor in the period was required to feed the animals there, while much of the other manorial produce was used to feed the Countess of March's

⁵⁴ TNA STAC3/3/37.

⁵⁵ TNA STAC4/5/47.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Broad, *Transforming English Rural Society*, 2.

⁵⁸ *VCH Shropshire* 4, 87; TNA SC2/967/3.

household, rather than intended for sale.⁵⁹ With no evidence of intensive farming of the demesne, including a surprising lack of sheep farming, it is clear that the focus on profitability through rents on Earnwood was no sixteenth-century, or even late medieval, innovation. In the 1370s and 1380s the Countess of March received rents for letting part of her demesne for the pannage of pigs. Earnwood and Kinlet represent two different styles of lordly manorial exploitation, rather than changing practices over time.⁶⁰ The lack of intensive agricultural farming at Earnwood from the fourteenth century onwards might be explained by the fact that the Earls of March and the Crown were absentee landlords – something which has been recognised as a feature of other similar settlements – rather than due to land conditions, given the fact that it is in the same parish as Kinlet.⁶¹ George Blount was himself a tenant of land in Earnwood in the late sixteenth century, while his heir, Rowland Lacon, purchased the manor at some point between 1581 and 1603.⁶² Their ancestor, Brian Cornwall, rented land there in the 1380s. Throughout the period under consideration the exploitation strategy in the parish of Kinlet as whole remained remarkably static.

The Blounts' reliance on their desmesne to produce income naturally led to increasingly intensive agricultural development. When Sir Thomas Blount of Kinlet (d.1524) made his will, the profits of Kinlet manor were considered enough to support pensions totalling 15 marks, 23s 4d. Additionally, he left a total of £160 to his daughters from 'the issues and profits that shall then come and growe of the said maner'. He also made provision for his

⁵⁹ TNA SC6/967/4. TNA SC6/967/7.

⁶⁰ Mark Bailey, *The English Manor c.1200-c.1500* (Manchester, 2002), 108 notes that, while broad trends in medieval manorial exploitation can be identified, adoption was piecemeal and localised. Also see B.F. Harvey, 'The aristocratic consumer in England in the long thirteenth century' in Michael Prestwich, Richard Britnell and Robin Frame (eds.), *Thirteenth Century England*, 6 (Woodbridge, 1997), 19-37.

⁶¹ W.G. Hoskins, *The Midland Peasant: The Economic and Social History of a Leicestershire Village* (London, 1957), 17; *VCH Shropshire* 4,85.

⁶² TNA SP12/36/1.

wife and five sons from Kinlet and his other, smaller, estates, which included the manors of Asheton in Herefordshire, Astall in Oxfordshire and Balterley in Shropshire, some tenements in Bewdley and smaller parcels of land in Oxfordshire and Staffordshire.⁶³ Little evidence survives of Thomas's agricultural activities, although his will notes that he kept cows and sheep in his park and pasture at Kinlet. He sold his half share of Idbury manor in Oxfordshire in 1504 but, otherwise, his landholding at his death was nearly identical to that which he inherited on the death of his father, indicating the continuing value of agriculture to his income.⁶⁴ The *Inquisition Post Mortem* for Thomas's son, Sir John Blount, from 1531 shows that he too held almost identical lands to his father, indicating that he retained a similar economic focus on Kinlet, although he was also able to benefit from his wife's substantial Staffordshire landholding.⁶⁵

Thomas's third son, Walter Blount of Astley, also sought to extend the agricultural value of his minor Worcestershire landholding, purchasing a 60 year lease of the tithe corn on the manor of Acton in Ombersley from the Abbot of Evesham in September 1538, for example.⁶⁶ It was probably either Walter or his son, Robert, who sold corn to the London merchant John Churchill during the Elizabethan period, for which there was a dispute over payment.⁶⁷ Walter's nephew, Sir George Blount of Kinlet was personally involved in the agricultural exploitation of his estates. In the early 1550s he presented a bill to the Chancery courts complaining that, although he was 'lawfully possessed' of many 'kinds of cattells shepe and beafes that is to say oxen shepe kyne and suche other', a number of his animals had been

⁶³ TNA C142/44/139; *Calendarium Inquisitionum Post Mortem sive Escaetarum*, vol 4 (London, 1828), 383.

⁶⁴ Mark Page, Victoria County History Oxfordshire volume 19, Texts in Progress (http://www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/sites/default/files/work-in-progress/idbury_manors_web_0.pdf p2, accessed 1 October 2015).

⁶⁵ TNA C142/52/15; TNA C142/52/16.

⁶⁶ Worcestershire Archives 705:56/3910/41/iv.

⁶⁷ TNA SP46/24, f.139.

taken from the custody of his bailiff, Raff Madewe, whom he had ordered to ‘keep and pasture’ the animals to George’s own use.⁶⁸ George was directly involved in the ensuing court case, complaining that the three who took the animals acted out of a personal grudge against him and his bailiff. He was also the defendant in a case that reached the Court of Star Chamber at some point between 1531 and 1544, where he was accused of forcible entry of land and taking cattle.⁶⁹

Agricultural practices changed over time, with land enclosure a major issue of the Tudor period, something in which some members of the Blount family also participated.⁷⁰ Thomas Blount of Sodington enclosed four acres of land known as Dartmoor on the manor of Sillingford in 1537.⁷¹ This caused opposition, with a neighbouring gentleman, Thomas Meysey, issuing a Bill of Complaint. In 1543 Meysey returned the matter to court, arguing in his second Bill of Complaint that it was common land and complaining that he had been ignored when he first ‘friendly required the said Thomas Blount to cast open the said common and to permit and suffer your said subject and his tenants to enjoye the same as they and their ancestoures of tyme out of mynde from tyme to tyme have used to do’.⁷² According to Meysey’s Bill of Complaint, the matter soon erupted into violence. The newly enclosed land (as the Bill of Complaint claimed) was used for the benefit of ‘Mr Blount of Sillingford and for iiij of his tenants’.⁷³ Enclosure was a major issue in legal disputes relating to the Blount family. In one case from the reign of Henry VIII, Walter and Mary Blount of

⁶⁸ TNA C1/1290/30-32.

⁶⁹ TNA STAC2/24/349.

⁷⁰ Andy Wood, ‘Some Banglyng About the Customes’: Popular Memory and the Experience of Defeat in a Sussex Village, 1549-1640’, *Rural History*, 25 (2014), 1-14, discusses a long running manorial legal dispute concerning enclosure, for example.

⁷¹ TNA STAC10/4/32.

⁷² TNA STAC2/20/370.

⁷³ TNA STAC10/4/32.

Uttoxeter complained that Mary had been violently attacked on land belonging to their manor of Blount's Hall, before four loads of hay were stolen.⁷⁴ Interrogatories drafted for the defendants makes it clear that at the heart of the matter was enclosure, with one asking 'if the hedges wher made and standinge when this deponent came to fetch the hey there or no and who dyd pull them downe'.⁷⁵ Although not explicitly referred to in the Bill of Complaint, it appears that the Blounts of Uttoxeter had fenced land that had once been common land on which manorial tenants could mow hay. Another case in which they were involved concerned their claims to a meadow in Uttoxeter and, although not explicitly referred to, may also have involved their attempts to enclose hitherto common land.⁷⁶ It is well known that enclosure was a contentious issue, with the potential to lead to considerable civil unrest at a local level, as indeed the cases relating to the Blounts suggests. Contemporary comment also makes it clear that enclosure was believed to have been carried out by violent means, to have been the cause of high prices and to have adversely affected the prosperity of manorial tenants and caused depopulation.⁷⁷ The enclosure in which the Blounts were involved can arguably be seen as part of a general trend towards increasing the size of the demesne on some manors which, as set out above, had existed since the medieval period. However, there is no doubt that enclosure was often viewed with hostility by manorial tenants and other local gentry in the sixteenth century and was often presented in the records as an assault on manorial custom and, thus, also a breach of the values of good lordship.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ TNA STAC2/17/220.

⁷⁵ TNA STAC2/24/93.

⁷⁶ TNA STAC2/10/4.

⁷⁷ For example, *A Discourse on the Commonweal of this Realm of England*, ed. M. Dewar (Charlottesville, 1969), 53-54.

⁷⁸ Wood, 'Some Banglyng', 3.

Continuing attempts to increase production can also be seen at Kinlet in the mid-sixteenth century. In 1543, for example, Edward Blount of Kidderminster, Sir Thomas Blount's second son, leased two meadows at Earnwood for a period of twenty-one years, demonstrating that he kept animals in the parish.⁷⁹ Edward's eldest son, Thomas, leased a field of pasture in the manor, as well as sixty acres of barren and rough upland ground and a meadow in 1565.⁸⁰ In 1565 Sir George Blount of Kinlet leased considerable land in Earnwood from the crown.⁸¹ He had also leased Earnwood Park, which contained 256 acres, from Edward VI in 1550, for twenty-one years, paying 30s a year for his lease, as well as £8 a year for the trees in the park (of which there were 530 oak trees). His legal dispute with Edward VI's uncle, Thomas Seymour, which was noted in 1549 to have 'touched his [Seymour's] owne private gayne' may have been in relation to Seymour's position as a tenant of Earnwood which impinged on the interests of the Blount family there.⁸² Such leased lands, while not actually part of the Kinlet demesne, were also lands farmed directly by the lords and should be considered in relation to the medieval expansion of the demesne at Kinlet. In all periods under consideration, the Blounts as middling gentry and relatively small-scale landowners, considered personal cultivation and pasturage to be their most effective economic strategy and principal source of income.

Local Economic Office and Industry

The family augmented their income in the period with local office. Both Sir John Blount of Kinlet and his son, George, were appointed masters of game for Wyre Forest under Henry

⁷⁹ *L&P 18 part 1*, 623(27).

⁸⁰ TNA SP12/36/1.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *A Collection of State Papers, Relating to Affairs in the Reigns of King Henry VIII, King Edward VI, Queen Mary, and Queen Elizabeth, from the Year 1542 to 1570 Transcribed from Original Letters and Other Authentick Memorials, Never Before Publish'd, Left by William Cecill Lord Burghley, and Now Remaining at Hatfield House*, ed. Samuel Haynes (London, 1740), Confession Wyghtman, no.2, 10 January 1549.

VIII.⁸³ George was also master of the game in Bewdley Park and secured the appointment by Mary I of his uncle, Walter Blount of Astley, to serve as keeper there beneath him.⁸⁴ Such appointments could be hugely lucrative. In 1554 Sir George Blount of Kinlet was accused by the government of felling trees for his own profit, which he sold for between seven and ten shillings each.⁸⁵ According to Humphrey Wheeler, a resident of Kinlet, who served under George in the forest between 1546 and 1554, ‘he hathe knowen the said Sir George Blount to have felled and taken two hundred trees sithens this deponent hath bynne officer there whiche trees hath bynne taken by the said Sir George as his fee trees like as other having the office of the said Sir George heretofore have used to have that is to say Sir Thomas Blunt Sir John Blunt and the Ladie Katherine Blount viz as dedd trees standing trees and trees dedd at the toppe and trees broken in the mydes’. George was accused again in 1570 of cutting down mature trees and selling them for profit.⁸⁶ Such an appointment was reliant on royal favour and was a point at which contact was made between the localities and central government.

Sir John Blount of Kinlet found this to his cost in 1524 when, following the death of his father, the stewardship of Bewdley was granted by the king to Sir William Compton, ignoring the fact that John held a joint grant with his father.⁸⁷ John was only able to recover it after Compton’s death. Similarly, the inheritance of a minor heir could lead to a dislocation in the holding of local office. John’s grandfather, twenty-year-old Humphrey Blount, was placed in the wardship of Lord Dudley and Gilbert Ince of Thornton in 1443 and was forced to prove his majority in court to achieve the return of his property and offices less than a year later.⁸⁸

⁸³ TNA STAC5/B5/3.

⁸⁴ TNA STAC4/4/54.

⁸⁵ TNA STAC4/10/12.

⁸⁶ TNA E178/314.

⁸⁷ Murphy, *Henry Fitzroy*, 55.

⁸⁸ *Calendar of the Fine Rolls*, vol XVII, 283; *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem 21 to 25 Henry VI 1442-1447*, vol XXVI, ed. M.L. Holford (Woodbridge, 2009), 196.

Nonetheless, there was clearly an expectation that such local office was hereditary. Indeed Katherine Blount, whose son George was placed under the Duke of Norfolk's wardship following his father's death, avoided a similar dislocation by taking over the offices herself until her son came of age, as Humphrey Wheeler noted in his witness statement above.⁸⁹ Given the loosely hereditary nature of the offices it is no surprise that John Blount wrote indignantly to Thomas Cromwell to complain of the loss of his stewardship of Bewdley or that his son, George, relied on the Forest of Wyre to supplement his income and resented outside interference – either from the government or neighbouring gentlemen – in the forest.⁹⁰ Crown office in the localities, while in part dependent on royal favour, could become an important and reliable source of income. It was the norm for a holder's heir to secure the office in succession.

The Blounts, like other members of their class, augmented their income through industry.⁹¹ Kinlet sits on a layer of coal, accessible in the pre-industrial age through the digging of coal pits.⁹² When the Lacons of Kinlet purchased Earnwood manor before 1603, the deeds confirmed that there were already coal mines there. In 1608, Sir Francis Lacon (great-grandson of Sir John Blount of Kinlet) also purchased additional coal mines at Bowers Hill in Arley, which were close to Kinlet. He may have been overseeing the mining himself during the period, since it was only in 1613 that he leased out the mines at Bowers Hill and Limepit Field in Earnwood.⁹³ From this, he was to receive 11d per ton of coal mined in the first year and 12d in later years. In the first two years of the lease 2000 tons of coal was mined, although Lacon did not receive his royalty of nearly £100 and thus took the mines back into

⁸⁹ TNA STAC4/10/12.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Friedman, *House and Household*, 25.

⁹² *Kinlet: Life and Times*, 68.

⁹³ Ibid.

his direct control again. Although there is no direct evidence of Blount family involvement in coal mining at Kinlet before the start of the seventeenth century, Limepit Field, where the Kinlet mines were situated, had been known by that name since at least the fourteenth century. Interestingly, this field, which lay in the manor of Earnwood, was leased to the lord of Kinlet, Brian Cornwall, for 30s in 1385-6 – a considerable amount compared to other rents on the manor.⁹⁴ Coal mining may well have been carried out then, while digging for lime almost certainly was, given the field's name, indicating attempts at industrial diversification in the medieval period, although the scale was undoubtedly larger in the early seventeenth century. Regardless, Lacon's willingness to lease the mines for a royalty that amounted only to around £50 per year and his difficulties in securing even that relatively minor sum suggests that industrial exploitation of the manor was not of major interest to him, with Kinlet's value (as far as its lord was concerned) still predominantly agricultural.

The industrial potential of many manors was however coming to be recognised, with technological advancements potentially allowing for a high level of industrial profits.⁹⁵ From at least the late sixteenth-century members of the family were involved in ironworking. Lord Robert Dudley (a kinsman of the Blounts of Kinlet), set up an ironworks in Cleobury Mortimer, the closest large town to Kinlet, after he acquired the manor in 1563, with the furnaces in existence by at least 1571.⁹⁶ The works rapidly expanded, with a 1584 survey of Dudley's estates noting that he had two iron mills in Cleobury Park. These were highly

⁹⁴ TNA SC6/967/7.

⁹⁵ J.L. Bolton, *The Medieval English Economy, 1150-1500* (London, 1980); Henry Cleere and David Crossley, *Iron Industry of the Weald* (Leicester, 1985); D.C. Coleman, *Industry in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1975); Robert Duplessis, *Transitions to Capitalism in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1997); Nigel Ramsay, 'Introduction' in John Blair and Nigel Ramsay (eds.), *English Medieval Industries* (London, 1991); John Swain, *Industry Before the Industrial Revolution: North-East Lancashire, c.1500-1640* (Manchester, 1986); Friedman, *House and Household*, 25.

⁹⁶ M. Baldwin, 'Ironworking in Cleobury Mortimer: Part I', *Cleobury Chronicles*, 3 (1994), 34-49.

profitable, providing an annual income of £400 by the early 1580s, in comparison to the £36 16s 11d that Dudley made from agriculture and rents on the manor.⁹⁷ Dudley's nephew, Robert Sidney, was so impressed with the works there that he permitted John Thornton of Neen Savage and John Crosse of Cleobury Mortimer to 'build a work for melting, making, and casting iron sows, to make iron by forge and furnace' at his manor at Coity in Glamorgan in 1589.⁹⁸ In 1588 the Cleobury ironworks were leased to Edward Blount of Kidderminster for four years at £400 per year.⁹⁹ The ironworks were then valued at £500 per year, giving Edward a potential profit of £100 per year.¹⁰⁰ Since Edward had, by then, been steward of Cleobury Mortimer manor for at least a year, he would have been in a position to know the value of the ironworks, with his profit making up a substantial amount of his income. In 1595 Edward Boughton and Edward Blount of Kidderminster took over a lease of the forges, furnaces and mills from Alice Weston, the widow of Dudley's previous tenant, John Weston.¹⁰¹ They later purchased the remainder of Weston's twenty-one year lease, taking the entire operation into their control.¹⁰² Weston had originally purchased this lease from Robert Dudley for £334 6s 9d but, within a few short years, Blount and Boughton were prepared to pay his widow £1200. Clearly, while the lease term was diminishing, the extent of the ironworking and the possible yearly returns were increasing, with them described at the time to be 'of very great yearly value and worth'. Edward Blount of Kidderminster, as the descendant of a junior branch of the Kinlet Blounts, held little land and needed to obtain an income from other sources, although diversification into industry was still not the rule amongst younger sons in the period. Edward's great-uncle, Robert Blount of Eckington and

⁹⁷ *Report on the Manuscripts of Lord De'Lisle and Dudley Preserved at Penshurst Place, vol I*, ed. C.L.Kingsford (Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, London, 1925), 301.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁹⁹ Simon Adams, *Leicester and the Court*, (Manchester, 2002), 326.

¹⁰⁰ British Library [hereafter BL] Harl Roll D 35, pt. 17.

¹⁰¹ TNA C2/Eliz/W8/53.

¹⁰² TNA C3/282/78.

his son, George, remained economically focussed on agriculture in spite of a similar lack of inheritance, as will be discussed below.

Land ownership also did not preclude a desire to obtain income through industry. Rowland Lacon built a furnace at Kenley (close to Kinlet) in around 1591, which he leased to local men.¹⁰³ His son, Sir Francis, built a further blast furnace at Willey between 1609 and 1619, which was also tenanted.¹⁰⁴ A further forge created by Dudley at Rowley was sold to Edward Blount's cousins, George and Eleanor Blount of Sodington in 1602, with the deed referring to the land 'and also all that ironmill there'.¹⁰⁵ It has been noted that it is extremely difficult to untangle the ownership of the forges in the Cleobury area in this period, but that 'it appears that by 1602 the Blounts were in control, either as owners or tenants, of both of the furnaces and both of the forges'.¹⁰⁶ These ironworks are particularly interesting since they utilised technology that was, then, brand new, and that they were the source of significant income for a figure as politically prominent as Robert Dudley, with his lead then followed on a local level by his Blount relatives.¹⁰⁷ The Blounts of Sodington also diversified into coal mining and iron production on their own land at Mamble. They owned a forge there in the first half of the seventeenth century, while coal mining in the same parish also dates from at least that period.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ *A History of Shropshire, vol VIII*, ed. A.T. Gaydon (Victoria County History, London, 1968), 96.

¹⁰⁴ Richard Hayman, 'The Shropshire Wrought-Iron Industry c1600-1900: A Study of Technological Change' (Univ of Birmingham, PhD, 2003), 27.

¹⁰⁵ Shropshire Archives 6468.

¹⁰⁶ Baldwin, 'Ironworking in Cleobury Mortimer: Part I', 42. See also P.W. King, 'The Development of the Iron Industry in South Staffordshire in the 17th Century: History and Myth', *Staffordshire Archaeological and Historical Society Transactions* 38 (1996-7), 59-76.

¹⁰⁷ Most notably blast furnaces, which were introduced to England in the sixteenth century. The period also saw increasing demand for iron, with ironworks known from many parts of England, such as the Sidney family's ironworks in the Sussex weald from the 1540s (*Sidney Ironworks Accounts 1541-1573*, ed. D.W. Crossley (London, 1975), 5). Other types of industry also expanded in the period. See Swain, *Industry Before the Industrial Revolution*.

¹⁰⁸ John Noake, *Noake's Guide to Worcestershire* (London, 1868), 271; David Poyner, Andrew Santer and Robert Evans, 'Mining in Hunthouse Wood, Mamble, Worcestershire', *Shropshire Caving and Mining Club*

It is clear that, as technology improved, so too did the potential for greater exploitation of land for industrial purposes in the area. However, while ironworking undoubtedly increased the income of Edward Blount of Kidderminster and George Blount of Sodington, George at least continued to carry out mixed farming on his estates. In his will dated 1610, he made no reference to ironworking, instead referring to the manors that he held and their values.¹⁰⁹

While part of the demesne at Mamble was let to one Thomas Smith for the cultivation of corn and grain, George also carried out pastoral farming on a considerable scale on the manor, bequeathing his wife, Eleanor, sixteen cows ‘at her choise’, four horses ‘suche as she shall make choice of’, forty sheep ‘and the half of all my swyne of all sortes’, she also received the best yoke of fat cattle, either oxen or kyne. Nonetheless, in spite of this agricultural activity, there is evidence that George was moving away from traditional agriculture in some areas, since he had enclosed the land at his manors of Timberlake in Worcestershire and Marbrook in Shropshire to form his ‘New park’. Since these made up half of his manors (with the fourth manor being Sillington), this did represent a sizeable reduction in the amount of land available to him for arable cultivation. However, it is known that his cousin, Sir George Blount of Kinlet, kept sheep and pigs in his parks at Kinlet and Knightley, demonstrating that such a change in land use did not also mean a reduction in the agricultural value of the manor.¹¹⁰ Nonetheless, the growing importance of industrialisation has been recognised in other gentry studies. Friedman considers that coal mining was central to Sir Francis Willoughby of Wollaton Hall’s economic prosperity, for example, with pits that were already in existence in the 1490s increasing rapidly in production in the sixteenth century and

Journal, 5 (1997), 46; David Poyner, and Robert Evans, ‘Mamble Colliery’, *Shropshire Caving and Mining Club Journal*, 4 (1996), 34 note that the Blount family’s colliery is the oldest known in the parish, although surviving records only go back as far as 1700.

¹⁰⁹ TNA PROB 11/117/577.

¹¹⁰ TNA STAC4/5/47; Erdeswick, *Staffordshire*, 142.

becoming the focus of capital investment.¹¹¹ A change in economic focus should be seen in the context of George Blount of Sodington's increasing interest in industry, with his will also referring to salt-pits in Droitwich.

The Blount family's financial interests in the salt industry of Droitwich began in the medieval period. Sir John Blount of Sodington, who was the last common ancestor of the Blounts of Sodington and Kinlet and died before 1427/8, demonstrates that attempts to diversify income sources were not entirely sixteenth century in origin. As well as his Worcestershire and Staffordshire manors, John was recorded at his death as owning a mill in Lindon in Worcestershire and six salt pans in Droitwich, worth 20s a year.¹¹² He was a man of diverse business interests, also holding the Bell on the Hope inn in Friday Street in London.¹¹³ It was salt that supplied the bulk of his non-agricultural income however. Droitwich in the late medieval period has been described as 'a genuine, purely industrial town'.¹¹⁴ The brine was measured out into vats which were held by private individuals who then boiled it to produce salt for sale. It was a lucrative business and continued to be exploited by the Blounts throughout the period under study here. As well as George Blount of Sodington's sixteenth-century interest in salt production, Robert Blount of Astley also possessed Droitwich salt vats in the 1550s and 1560s.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Friedman, *House and Household*, 25.

¹¹² J.T. Driver, 'Worcestershire Knights of the Shire', *Transactions of the Worcestershire Archaeological Society*, 3rd series vol 4 (1974), 29; *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem 1-5 Henry VI 1422-1427*, vol XXII, ed. Kate Parkin (Woodbridge, 2003), 397.

¹¹³ Driver, 'Worcestershire Knights', 29.

¹¹⁴ Hilton, *Medieval Society*, 175.

¹¹⁵ TNA C3/187/71.

Such interests augmented an income primarily earned through agriculture, although the evidence of ironworking shows that industry was recognised as increasingly lucrative in the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-centuries. Nonetheless, the more established and reliable agricultural production still appears to have been the major income source. The Blounts farmed their demesne (or land leased or enclosed by them to effectively expand the area under their direct cultivation) in all periods under discussion here, albeit that they had always seen the potential for industry or local office to increase that income, with such measures still primarily tied to the land on which their wealth was based.¹¹⁶ This was by no means a universal strategy, but one that appears to have been adopted by many moderately wealthy gentry in the medieval period and which still held true in the early modern period. Even at Earnwood, where very different economic strategies were adopted, it is clear that these strategies dated from the medieval period and were not changes instigated in the sixteenth century.

The Continuing Importance of the Manor

The parish of Kinlet contained the manors of Kinlet and Earnwood and part of the manor of Highley (with the remained of that manor in the parish of Highley), with manorial boundaries in the parish of Kinlet never rigidly drawn. This can be seen most clearly in the late fourteenth century, where Earnwood's accounts (the only surviving medieval accounts for the three manors) can be compared to the 1381 Poll Tax return for the three manors. This shows considerable crossover of personnel. For example, William Elf was a tenant on the manor of Earnwood throughout the 1370s, 80s and 90s, yet was assessed in 1381 as being resident at Kinlet.¹¹⁷ The Blakenegge family, too, were both Earnwood tenants in the 1370s and 1380s

¹¹⁶ This has also been noted in other gentry studies. For example, Friedman, *House and Household*, 179.

¹¹⁷ TNA SC2/967/3; TNA SC6/967/5; TNA SC6/967/7; TNA SC6/967/14; *Poll Taxes*, ed. Fenwick, 409-410.

and resident at Kinlet manor in 1381, while of the six customary tenants named in relation to ploughing works at Earnwood in 1378-9, three were assessed as being resident in Kinlet in 1381 and two in Highley. The 1380-1 manor court rolls for Earnwood and Highley show similar movement.¹¹⁸ Richard Rushbury received a lease of a croft called Carterscroft in Earnwood in April 1381 yet, in the poll tax return of the same year, he was resident in Kinlet. There are many more examples showing the fluidity of the boundaries between the manors in this period, with the parish in which they were all situated arguably playing a larger role in the delineation of individual's spheres of economic activity than usually recognised in the medieval period.

The movement between the three manors continued into the sixteenth century. In the 1524 lay subsidy, William Longlond was resident in Kinlet, while he (or a relative with the same name) held a pasture in Earnwood in 1565.¹¹⁹ The Longlond family had lived in Highley in the fourteenth- and fifteenth-centuries. They also appear frequently in juror lists for the Kinlet manor court in the sixteenth century. Similarly, the Weaver and Dallow families were farming land in Earnwood in 1565, but resident in Kinlet in 1524. A Thomas Dallow was resident in Earnwood in the 1571 lay subsidy.¹²⁰ The Highley parish registers, which survive from 1551 onwards also suggest overlap, with Anne Dallow buried there in 1556, for example.¹²¹ This fluidity suggests that the manor was less rigidly defined in terms of personnel in the medieval period than sometimes allowed, with little real change evident in the sixteenth century.

¹¹⁸ TNA SC2/197/106.

¹¹⁹ TNA SP12/36/1.

¹²⁰ TNA E179/167/44.

¹²¹ Shropshire Archives, Highley Parish Registers.

This does not suggest any decline in the manor, something which has important implications for the authority of manor courts in the period and which has been identified in other studies.¹²² Instead, it suggests that, in the parish of Kinlet, the manor was always more of an economic than a social boundary. The resident status of Kinlet's lords as opposed to the absentee landlords at Earnwood and Highley also arguably helped to bolster the social position and local political power of the Blounts since they too crossed manorial boundaries to expand their sphere of influence. All financial evidence from the period, including the 1381 poll tax return and the sixteenth-century lay subsidies indicates that, with the exception of the Cornwalls and later the Blounts, the manors were not highly stratified with most other individuals means-tested to pay the same amount of tax. This must have helped the Blounts assert a greater influence over the manors in the parish, a pattern that is seen throughout the entirety of the period under discussion here.

Local Politics and Patronage

Gentry Status

Blounts were prominent in local politics, with their influence sometimes expanding to a county level. Although always described as members of the gentry, however, within the family there were considerable variations in wealth, power and status, with an analysis of the family providing data on the highly nuanced way in which gentry status could be perceived in the period. The social position of Robert Blount of Eckington, who was the son of Sir Thomas Blount of Kinlet, is particularly illuminating. As a fifth son, he received only a

¹²² Waddell, 'Governing England', 301, 309; Harrison, 'Manor Courts', 50; Large, 'Rural Society and Agricultural Change'), 105-138.

pension of five marks a year for thirty years out of the profits of the manor of Kinlet, and a bed.¹²³ He may not even have received this, since his father's will was successfully challenged by Robert's eldest brother. Robert was employed by the Earl of Shrewsbury, who held the manor of Eckington in Derbyshire and, by 1551, had been appointed as the manor's bailiff.¹²⁴ In addition to the important scythe and sickle making industry in the parish, the surviving court rolls for the manor present a picture of a largely agricultural community.¹²⁵

Robert probably occupied the cottage called Cockpitt Close, with a croft adjoining, of which his grandson surrendered the tenancy in 1634 after he had moved to London and left the parish.¹²⁶ The first mention of Robert in the surviving Eckington manor court rolls is in 1576 when an inquest was held into the copyhold tenants.¹²⁷ He was very carefully described as 'Robert Blounte, gent.', while the other copyhold tenants were not assigned any rank. However, he was treated exactly as the other copyhold tenants listed, who were being fined for allowing their pigs to wander unringed. In a further inquest held in 1579, his status was not given, while he was merely listed as the nineteenth of the twenty-one copyhold tenants fined for allowing their animals to stray.¹²⁸ In a Great Court held on 2 May 1580 an inquest was taken of the free tenants, before the 'low inquest was held' of copyhold tenants, with 'Robert Blunt, gent.' again recorded low down the list.¹²⁹ Once again he, along with a considerable number of tenants, was fined for allowing pigs to wander unringed. With the exception of his office as bailiff, surviving manorial documents show little to differentiate

¹²³ Shropshire Archives 3320/62/7.

¹²⁴ H.J.H. Garratt and C. Rawcliffe, (eds.), 'Derbyshire Feet of Fines 1323-1546', *Derbyshire Record Society*, XI (1985), 1155; TNA C1/1307/23; TNA C1/1407/8-10.

¹²⁵ David Hey, 'The origins and early growth of the Hallamshire cutlery and allied trades' in Chartres and Hey, *Essays in Honour of Joan Thirsk*, 343-368.

¹²⁶ *Eckington: The Court Rolls vol 4 1633-1694*, ed. H.J.H. Garratt (South Crossland, 2000), 12.

¹²⁷ *Eckington: The Court Rolls vol 3 1506-1589*, ed. H.J.H. Garratt (South Crossland, 2003), 92.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

Robert and his lifestyle at Eckington. He was, clearly, well-integrated into the local community. At the court baron on 9 May 1580, for example, he gave 6d for an inquiry into the right of way through Danbeck Meadow, indicating that it was of importance to him.¹³⁰ Four months later he gave an additional 6d for an enquiry into the right of way through Oxeclose Meadow.¹³¹ An example of the kind of activity that Robert was carrying out on his tenement at Eckington can be seen in the record of a grant to him in 1571, by the manorial steward, of ‘free liberty to dig and get coals and stone and also to fell, cut down, stubble and grubbe all manner of woods, underwoods, trees and roots of trees standing, growing or being in all such those messuages, cottages, lands, tenements, meadows, closes, pastures, commons, hereditaments, whatsoever being customary lands lying and being near Gleydleis within this lordship which the said Robert and Elizabeth lately had of the surrender of James Asherton, gent., deceased and of Godfrey Asheton son and heir apparent of the said James’.¹³² Robert, who was already elderly by this stage, died in March or April 1581, leaving his son, George, and wife, Elizabeth, as his heirs.¹³³ Mother and son continued to hold the copyhold tenancy, with Elizabeth Blount frequently fined for failing to attend the manorial court.¹³⁴ She and George jointly surrendered their tenements lying near Gleadleys in the manor to Robert Sitwell in 1587, with George carefully described as a gentleman in the documents relating to this, while Sitwell’s status was not given.¹³⁵

The social position of the three generations of Blounts of Eckington is interesting, since they were clearly considered gentry, despite holding only a copyhold tenancy in their parish of

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid., 129.

¹³² Ibid., 133.

¹³³ Ibid., 137.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 171.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 237.

residence and farming in a way similar to that of their yeoman and lower status neighbours. They may no longer have used their coat of arms, since no pedigree was produced for the family in the Derbyshire heraldic visitations of 1569 or 1611, although it is clear that the heralds were active in the area around Eckington.¹³⁶ Even Robert's position as manorial bailiff did not necessarily set him apart from the other residents on the manor. While D.R. Hainsworth considers that a manor's steward stood at the crucial interface between landlords and tenants in the early modern period, the role of bailiff could also be significant, with the bailiff required to collect rents and ensure attendance at the manor court.¹³⁷ However, it was also a part time role and of lower status than the steward, with gentility, while desirable, not a requirement for either role.¹³⁸ Manorial office could, however, be lucrative.¹³⁹ While the manorial documents do not suggest any great distinction between the daily life of the Blounts of Eckington and their social inferiors, there was a considerable wealth and social differential. George Blount of Eckington paid £400 for the nearby manor of More Hall in 1597.¹⁴⁰ They also socialised with neighbouring gentry, with Frances Blount, George's sister, marrying the gentleman, Ralph Clarke of Ashgate in Chesterfield.¹⁴¹ George's mother, Elizabeth, had married the gentleman Nicholas Browne of Marsh by 1611.¹⁴²

The best evidence of the family's true financial position can be seen in Robert's will, made before his death in 1581.¹⁴³ In it, he made bequests totalling £400 to his unmarried daughters,

¹³⁶ W.C. Metcalfe (ed.), 'Pedigrees contained in the visitations of Derbyshire, 1569 and 1611', *The Genealogist*, New Series, 7 (1891), 16.

¹³⁷ Hainsworth, *Stewards, Lords and People*, 1, 7, 10, 17.

¹³⁸ Hainsworth, *Stewards, Lords and People*, 27; James, *Family, Lineage and Civil Society*, 33.

¹³⁹ Cooper, *Houses of the Gentry*, 7; Hainsworth, *Stewards, Lords and People*, 17; James, *Family, Lineage and Civil Society*, 33.

¹⁴⁰ Joseph Hunter, *Hallamshire: The History and Topography of the Parish of Sheffield in the County of York* (London, 1819), 282.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹⁴² Metcalfe, 'Pedigrees', 16.

¹⁴³ TNA PROB 11/63/224.

and 100 marks to his second son, Godfrey. Godfrey also received an annuity of 20 marks out of the issues and profits of the woods in Eckington Park or elsewhere within the manor of Eckington, to which Robert was entitled due to a lease granted by Lord Hunsdon. He noted that he had already paid £540 to his three married daughters, while his lands in Eckington were left to his wife for life and then his eldest son. While, based on the manorial evidence from Eckington, there was little to distinguish Robert from his lower ranking neighbours, his gentle birth and connections were of central importance to his continuing claims of gentle status and his financial prosperity, even though he had inherited no land. Thanks to the Earl of Shrewsbury's patronage, Robert held paid office as Eckington's bailiff, while his son, George, received a joint appointment from the then Earl of Shrewsbury in May 1589 to act as bailiff of the manor of Barley in Nottinghamshire.¹⁴⁴ This social connection was the source of Robert's wealth compared to that of his neighbours. He is known, for example, to have obtained considerable assistance from the fourth earl in relation to his lucrative acquisition of the parsonage of Child's Ercall in Shropshire, which will be discussed in more detail later.¹⁴⁵ Such patronage would not be extended to a man below gentle status, indicating the profound importance of Robert's continued claims to gentility in the period.

The scale of the bequests in Robert's will are similar to those made by his kinsman, Richard Blount of Iver (from the Mapledurham branch of the family), in 1506.¹⁴⁶ However Richard, unlike Robert, was a significant landowner, with major estates at Iver and Mapledurham. Traditionally, the gentry have been described as a landowning class, although historians now recognise considerably more nuance in the definition, including an increasing awareness of

¹⁴⁴ Nottinghamshire Archives 157/DD/P/42/15.

¹⁴⁵ *L&P* 11, 247, 459.

¹⁴⁶ J.R.H. Weaver and A. Beardwood (ed.), *Some Oxfordshire Wills Proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, 1393-1510* (Oxfordshire Record Society, 1958), 89-90.

the importance of the value of moveable goods in the assessment of an individual's status.¹⁴⁷

While the non-landowning Robert's gentility could potentially be seen as evidence of the rigidity of social class boundaries in the period, the position is arguably more sophisticated.

While Robert lived a daily life more akin to that of a yeoman, as an acknowledged gentleman (as the son of a gentleman) he was also able to better access patronage networks, as his relationship with the Earl of Shrewsbury shows. This is also supported by the position of Robert's nephew, John Blount Esquire of Warwick, who was a third son of the junior Kidderminster branch of the Kinlet family and inherited nothing but a pension of 5 marks a year. He was able to covenant to pay £70 a year for the lease of the manor of Stoneythorpe in Warwickshire in 1566, as well as making a payment of £200 for 900 sheep.¹⁴⁸ He was assisted in this purchase by his more prominent elder brother, Thomas Blount of Kidderminster, demonstrating that status must, in part, have been due to social connections.

Other similar examples can be seen in areas of Blount family influence. George Pigott of Kinlet, who died in 1583, was always described as a gentleman in surviving documents, although court records and manorial documents suggest that he lived more like a yeoman on the manor and was closely related to some of the families of that class at Kinlet.¹⁴⁹ In his will, as well as carefully describing himself as a gentleman, he referred to 'my manoure called the Moorhall'.¹⁵⁰ Moorhall was more usually described as a farm in surviving documents, something that suggests that Pigott, like Robert Blount of Eckington, was at pains to stress his gentility in comparison to his neighbours. There were often gentlemen resident on manors which were not their possessions or the possessions of their family. Leonard Indkyns, for

¹⁴⁷ Hilton, *English Peasantry*, 223; Cooper, *Houses of the Gentry*, 5; Sharpe, *Early Modern England*, 161-2; Whittle and Griffiths, *Consumption and Gender*, 15; Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself*, 1-2, 10, 31-2.

¹⁴⁸ Northamptonshire Archives Th 826.

¹⁴⁹ He refers to 'my cousen Richard Southall' in his will, for example (TNA PROB 11/65/162).

¹⁵⁰ TNA PROB 11/143/657.

example, was living at Kinlet in 1614 when he made his will. While he called himself a gentleman, he also referred to Sir Francis and Lady Lacon (who then held Kinlet manor) as his master and mistress.¹⁵¹ He was simultaneously of the same gentry status and a social inferior.

A gentleman has always been difficult for historians to define, with most considering the status linked to land ownership, albeit that non-landowning gentlemen – such as younger sons – are acknowledged.¹⁵² According to contemporaries, Robert Blount of Eckington was as much of a gentleman as his brother, Sir John Blount of Kinlet, in spite of the fact that the latter was a substantial landowner thanks both to his own paternal inheritance and that of his wife. Both men also transmitted this ‘gentility’ to their sons: George Blount of Eckington and Sir George Blount of Kinlet.¹⁵³ An alternative view, that status was determined largely by wealth may be more useful, although, while Robert Blount of Eckington evidently had access to some level of wealth in money, other non-landowning gentlemen discussed above, such as George Pigott, do not appear to have held funds or goods very different from lower ranking members of the same community based on a survey of their wills.¹⁵⁴ The Blount family demonstrate the broad spectrum of the gentry in the period, with large landowners, such as the Blounts of Kinlet considered, at least nominally, on a same social level as their non-landowning kin. A division of the rank into knight, esquire and gentleman, which was current

¹⁵¹ TNA PROB 11/124/549.

¹⁵² Acheson, *Gentry Community*, 29; Christine Carpenter, *Locality and Polity: A Study of Warwickshire Landed Society, 1401-1499* (Cambridge, 1992), 35-6; Peter Coss, *The Knight in Medieval England 1000-1400* (Stroud, 1993), 129; Peter Coss, ‘Knights, esquires and the origins of social gradation’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5 (1995), 156-7; Gordon Mingay, *The Gentry. The Rise and Fall of a Ruling Class* (London, 1976), 3; Ralph Bernard Smith, *Land and Politics in the England of Henry VIII. The West Riding of Yorkshire: 1530-46* (Oxford, 1970), 65.

¹⁵³ W.A. Carrington, (ed.), ‘Subsidy for the Hundred of Scarsdale – 1599’, *Journal of the Derbyshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*, 24 (1902), 5-26.

¹⁵⁴ Jeremy Boulton, *Neighbourhood and Society: A London Suburb in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1989), 99.

in the period, overcomes this lack of distinction to a certain extent although other studies have highlighted the difficulty in defining the lowest rank of the gentry given the similarity of their lifestyles with their lower ranking neighbours.¹⁵⁵

While the Blounts of Eckington suggest that an additional measure of gentility was through inherited status rather than landowning, wealth or lifestyle, there were limits to this. Godfrey Blount, the second son of Robert Blount of Eckington adds further detail.¹⁵⁶ He had died by May 1590 and had been succeeded by his young son, William Blount, who was referred to in an application to terminate his wardship as a yeoman – an apparent drop in status from the family's earlier claims to gentility.¹⁵⁷ Nonetheless, in spite of this, he was still of high enough status for his wardship to be granted to Lord Burghley, while his inherited property was comparable to that held by his grandfather, Robert Blount of Eckington.¹⁵⁸ Perhaps William Blount of Wymeswold used the ambiguity of gentry status to his own advantage – calling himself a yeoman as a means of terminating his wardship. Alternatively, perhaps his lifestyle meant that the person who wrote the application simply failed to recognise William's gentility (which, as set out above, could be a somewhat esoteric concept in relation to the non-landowning gentry). The Blounts of Wymeswold were on a downward financial path: by the mid-seventeenth century their farm had reduced in size to only 6.5 acres of sown crops.¹⁵⁹ Even then, there were still vestiges of the family's former status in the way that they presented in the local area. It is probably this William Blount who served as a churchwarden

¹⁵⁵ Acheson, *Gentry Community*, 49.

¹⁵⁶ *Visitation of Shropshire*, ed. Grazebrook and Rylands, 53.

¹⁵⁷ Derbyshire Record Office D231M/7539.

¹⁵⁸ 'One messuage, two gardens, two orchards, 60 acres of land, 8 acres of meadow, half an acre of pasture with appurtenances in Wymeswold in the tenure of Thomas Hickling and William Francke, a messuage in Wymeswold in the occupation of Edward Courte, a messuage, one garden, two tofts, 24 acres of land, 8 acres of meadow with appurtenances in Montsorrel, Rothley and Quorn in the tenure of Robert Jerrett; a moiety of a messuage, 30 acres of land, 4 acres of meadow and half an acre of pasture in Burton on the Wolds, in the occupation of Thomas Ryder and another messuage in Wymeswold in the tenure of William Francke'.

¹⁵⁹ W.G. Hoskins, *Provincial England* (London, 1963), 160.

at Wymeswold in 1598, 1609 and 1611.¹⁶⁰ In relation to the wider Blount family and their neighbours, at least, a gentleman was someone who presented as a gentleman and who people agreed was a gentleman: land ownership was not necessarily a requirement with the lower ranks of the gentry. At the same time, while the continuing gentility of the sixteenth-century Blounts of Eckington shows the importance of social connections and networks and the fact that gentry status could be maintained even when many of the factors traditionally associated with gentility no longer applied, there were limits to this. The Blounts of Eckington show that gentry status was fluid. As well as the expansion in the numbers of gentry in the period which is recognised by historians, it was also possible for gentry status to be lost.¹⁶¹

The Blounts within the Local Community

The lords of the manor of Kinlet dominated their community in the medieval period, with the 1381 poll tax returns highlighting the very considerable difference in wealth between the lord and his tenants and neighbours. In line with other studies from the period, the three manors in Kinlet parish show evidence of increasing social stratification at the levels beneath the lord in the sixteenth century.¹⁶² For Earnwood, for example, Edward Pigott, John Southall and Humphrey Dallow (all members of long-established families in the parish) were assessed to hold significant goods worth between £3 and £4 in the 1524 lay subsidy.¹⁶³ All the other occupants' goods were valued in shillings or pence. Kinlet manor also showed considerable variation in wealth, with Humphrey Dallow and members of the locally prominent Elf, Weaver and Winwood families particularly prosperous. This continued into the late sixteenth

¹⁶⁰ Leicester and Rutland Record Office: Wymeswold Parish Registers.

¹⁶¹ Cooper, *Houses of the Gentry*, 5; Sharpe, *Early Modern England*, 161-2; Whittle and Griffiths, *Consumption and Gender*, 15; James, *Family, Lineage and Civil Society*, 71, 178.

¹⁶² Sharpe, *Early Modern England*, 93; Shepard and Spicksley, 'Worth, Age, and Social Status', 493, 528.

¹⁶³ *The Lay Subsidy for Shropshire 1524-7*, ed. Michael Faraday (Shropshire Record Series 3, 1999), 111.

century. In the 1571 lay subsidy, Sir George Blount's lands were assessed at £20 53s 4s.¹⁶⁴ The next wealthiest member of the community was the gentleman George Piggot, who held land assessed at 40s 5s 4d, while Thomas and Humphrey Southall each possessed goods worth £5 8s 4d and John Tedstill owned goods worth £3 5s. No other individuals were listed in Kinlet, while at Earnwood only three men were listed: Allen Hamond who possessed land worth 40s 5s 4d, Humphrey Wheeler, whose goods were worth £4 5s and Thomas Dallow whose goods were worth £3 5s. While stratification at the lower levels of the manor had evidently increased since 1381, the disparity between the lord and the other occupants of the manors was still very great, something that is unusual even in relation to manors in the local area in which there were resident gentry. For example, at Bold, George's brother-in-law, Thomas Ridley, was assessed to hold lands worth £10 26s 8d. The only other individual listed held goods worth £3 5s. Only two gentlemen in the county were assessed to possess land worth more than Sir George Blount, although Sir Simon Mucklow of Erdington possessed land worth almost twice as much. Kinlet Hall, which was built in the sixteenth century, had eighteen hearths in 1672, while no other house on the manor had more than six and, in the parish, seven.¹⁶⁵ The Blounts were by far the most prosperous members of their community.

The Blounts inherited Kinlet through a female ancestor, with that line of descent stretching back to Domesday. There is evidence of a similar continuity of personnel on the manor and in the parish from at least the late medieval period and through the sixteenth century, as discussed earlier.¹⁶⁶ It is clear from the 1524 and 1571 lay subsidy returns that the longest-

¹⁶⁴ TNA E179/167/44.

¹⁶⁵ *The Shropshire Hearth Tax Roll of 1672*, ed. W. Watkins-Pitchford (Shropshire Archaeological and Parish Register Society, 1949).

¹⁶⁶ Much of this analysis comes from a study of parish surnames which is recognised as a 'crude indicator of relationship', but still widely used (Christopher Dyer, 'Changes in the Link Between Families and Land in the West Midlands in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries' in Smith, *Land, Kinship and Life-Cycle*, 305-311; Boulton, *Neighbourhood and Society*, 7). For example, members of the Elf family appear at Kinlet in 1381 and

standing surnames, such as Winwood, Dallow and Southall were also the wealthiest members of the community below gentry status, suggesting that wealth and status within the community could be built up over time. The frequency with which their names appear in surviving records testify to the social importance of a small number of families on the manor, as well as the great continuity of personnel in the manor and parish. It is recognised from other studies that such families tended to dominate manor court juries, and this is borne out at Kinlet where juries were largely drawn from the same locally prominent families, with some evidence that a place on the jury was handed down from father to son.¹⁶⁷ Such a selection policy reduced the direct personal involvement of some members of the community from the earlier medieval practice of all members of the community attending.¹⁶⁸ As such, from the jury lists at Kinlet it is possible to identify an intermediate tier in local society – those well below the lords but above those members of the community not included in the juries or on other appointments. For example, John Winwood acted as a juror in 1546.¹⁶⁹ Walter Winwood appeared on juries on 20 July 1553, 28 April 1556 and 6 November 1556.¹⁷⁰ Thomas Winwood appeared on juries on 1 July 1561, 9 July 1562, 29 October 1565 and 1 February 1566.¹⁷¹ In a badly damaged Elizabethan court record from before 1581, Thomas Winwood appeared again, with William Winwood.¹⁷² Walter Winwood was also listed as one of the tenants fined for non-attendance. At least one member of the Draper and Longland families also appeared on all the above juries. For the Southall family, Roger Southall appeared on the juries up until 1561. Although the court records for the century between 1566 and 1664 are missing, a Southall was back on the jury lists on 25 August 1664, while a

Earnwood in 1373-4, 1378-9, 1385-6, 1394-5 and 1534-5 (*Poll Taxes*, ed. Fenwick, 409-410); TNA SC2/967/3; TNA SC6/967/5; TNA SC6/967/7; TNA SC6/967/14; TNA SC6/966/12; TNA SC6/HENVII/493; TNA SC6/HENVII/494; TNA SC6/HENVIII/2954). Local records provide many other examples.

¹⁶⁷ Anthony Musson, *Medieval Law in Context* (Manchester, 2001), 110.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁶⁹ Shropshire Archives 3320 58/5 no.1.

¹⁷⁰ Shropshire Archives 3320 58/6/2; 58/5 no.2; 58/5 no.3.

¹⁷¹ Shropshire Archives 3320 58/5 no.4; 58/5 no.5; 58/5 no.6; 58/5 no.7.

¹⁷² Shropshire Archives 3320 58/6/1.

George Southall was described as a gentleman in the court records, indicating a continuing rise in social status.¹⁷³ A similar position can also be seen in the Eckington manor court rolls, suggesting that in that community too, where there was no resident lord, the pattern of stratification amongst those below the rank of gentry existed. There, too, the jury lists and names of prominent tenants show the same surnames repeated from 1506 until the end of the sixteenth century.¹⁷⁴

There was always a hierarchy of office in the local area, with the most prominent men taking the most important offices.¹⁷⁵ This can also be seen at Kinlet. Members of the Browne alias Smyth family, who considered their surname Browne, but who – as the local blacksmiths – were often also called Smith in the local community (leading to them always called ‘Browne alias Smyth’ in surviving records), regularly sat as jurors, while Allyn Browne alias Smyth served as a churchwarden in 1589, alongside Humphrey Southall, a member of an equally prominent family.¹⁷⁶ Both these names were long established at Kinlet and continued in the area until at least the nineteenth century.¹⁷⁷ The role of churchwarden was a particularly important one in the parish, and was open to members of the laity, with the office holders charged with guarding church property and collecting sums due to the church.¹⁷⁸

Churchwardens also had important local administrative functions to carry out, including the administration of the Poor Law, the election of surveyors of the highway (after 1555) and for dealing with the destruction of vermin (after 1566). In Highley in 1589, the churchwardens were George Poultney, Nicholas Bradley, Thomas Charnock, Richard Palmer and Richard

¹⁷³ Shropshire Archives 3320 Childe 58/7.

¹⁷⁴ *Eckington: Court Rolls III*, ed. Garratt, 1.

¹⁷⁵ Duffy, *Voices of Morebath*, 31.

¹⁷⁶ *The Glebe Terriers of Shropshire Part 1*, ed. Sylvia Watts (Shropshire Record Series 5, 2001), 144.

¹⁷⁷ For example, Kinlet Parish Registers at Shropshire Archives.

¹⁷⁸ J.R. Tanner, *Tudor Constitutional Documents* (Cambridge, 1930), 509-510.

Holloway, all local men whose families were connected to others by marriage across the local area.¹⁷⁹

Although historians acknowledge that there was a hierarchy of local offices and it was only the most prominent families that served as churchwardens or who were selected for juries, the considerable interrelatedness of the families at Kinlet ensured that even those lower down the social scale had the potential for indirect access to higher status individuals and a voice in the local community.¹⁸⁰ Family networks have long been recognised by historians to have been particularly important in the period, with parish society characterised as a network of small households.¹⁸¹ Susan Amussen, too, has noted that ‘the processes of government were not always formal’ in her work in relation to local communities in Norfolk.¹⁸² The evidence from Kinlet suggests that a single family network could stretch from the gentry to the yeomanry and below with considerable ease. For example, in November 1563 Richard Weaver of Kinlet married Margery Palmer in Highley parish church, with members of the Palmer family prominently appearing in the parish registers for Highley.¹⁸³ James Southall married Margaret Oseland at Highley in February 1591, with the Oselands also well established in Highley and known to have intermarried with members of the community there. John Oseland married Isabel Lowe at Highley in January 1573, while an Elizabeth Lowe married Richard Palmer in June 1577, linking the Weavers to the Oselands and Lowes thanks to the earlier marriage of

¹⁷⁹ *Glebe Terriers of Shropshire*, ed. Watts, 121.

¹⁸⁰ Archer, *Pursuit of Stability*, 59; Boulton, *Neighbourhood and Society*, 140; Sharpe, *Early Modern England*, 96; Amussen, *An Ordered Society*, 136; French and Barry, *Identity and Agency*, 12-13; Amussen, *An Ordered Society*, 135.

¹⁸¹ Wrightson, ‘Politics of the Parish’, 13. Population studies from pre-industrial communities have long noted the short distances that people travelled to find marriage partners, leading to considerable inter-relatedness. See Bessie Maltby, ‘Easingwold marriage horizons’, *Local Population Studies*, 2 (1969), 36-39; Bessie Maltby, ‘Parish registers and the problem of mobility’, *Local Population Studies*, 6 (1971), 32-42 and R.F. Peel, ‘Local intermarriage and the stability of rural population in the English midlands’, *Geography*, 27 (1942), 22-30.

¹⁸² Amussen, *An Ordered Society*, 135.

¹⁸³ Shropshire Archives: Highley parish registers.

Richard Weaver. Following the marriage of Margaret Oseland to James Southall, all could potentially call on assistance from the Southalls in the manor courts and other local affairs, while the Southalls were related to the Dallows. Sir Thomas Oseland had also been the vicar of Highley until his death in April 1589.¹⁸⁴ Eleanor, the daughter of John Carter, who died in Kinlet in 1548 and was relatively affluent, also married into the Oseland family.¹⁸⁵ Daughters of John Browne alias Smyth, whose family frequently appeared on juries, married into the Goodman and Carpenter families.¹⁸⁶ Both families appear regularly in sources for Kinlet, although they had no presence on jury lists or as churchwardens. They could potentially call upon kinship links for assistance. A widow, Elizabeth Winwood of Kinlet, who made her will in 1560, was the sister of Richard Carpenter, while Sir Thomas Oseland, vicar of Highley, witnessed her will.¹⁸⁷ Her children would therefore also have been related to the substantial farmer Thomas Cantrell of Kinlet, who died in 1609 and referred to ‘my couson Richard Carpenter’ in his will.¹⁸⁸ Social links – which demonstrate some level of active interaction not always certain in family relationships – can arguably be of even more importance to historians studying local political culture.¹⁸⁹ At Kinlet, for example, Thomas Browne alias Smythe is known from legal papers to have let his leasehold land to Roger Southall, something which provides a further link between two prominent families, while wealthy farmer Thomas Cantrell was once a servant to the yeoman Thomas Southall.¹⁹⁰ The evidence of such social links often survives by chance and are all too easily overlooked: both Edward Blount of Kidderminster and his son, Thomas Blount of Kidderminster, for example, were attended in their final sicknesses by one Ralph Smythe of Bewdley, who was asked to witness

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ HDRO Will of John Carter, 1548.

¹⁸⁶ HDRO Will of John Browne alias Smyth, 1611.

¹⁸⁷ HDRO Will of Elizabeth Winwood, 1560.

¹⁸⁸ TNA PROB 11/114/341.

¹⁸⁹ Alan MacFarlane, *Reconstructing Historical Communities* (Cambridge, 1977), 176-177.

¹⁹⁰ TNA STAC3/3/37; TNA PROB 11/111/132.

both their wills nearly a decade apart, suggesting networks on a local level not confined to kinship relationships.¹⁹¹ Sources from Kinlet, as well as other Blount manors such as Deddington, show that individuals often spent most of their lives living in one parish or manor, such as sixty year old Edward Pygot, who recalled in 1552 that he had spent the past forty years living in Kinlet parish.¹⁹² The settled nature of many rural communities, as well as the more specific evidence of individual's long tenure there, supports the argument that strong family and social links were built in rural communities between all levels of society.¹⁹³ As such, there was considerable scope even for those who could not access the higher ranking local offices to have some level of input into local government, a process that has been recognised in other areas of the country.¹⁹⁴ Court records, which will be discussed in the next chapter, show that community relations were not always harmonious, but the fact that tenants were prepared to bring a case or act as a witness in a dispute against their lord or some other neighbour demonstrates the complexity of a community in which social links were constantly made, broken or reaffirmed.¹⁹⁵ While there is no doubt that Kinlet was a highly stratified place in the sixteenth century, co-operation from all levels was essential in the smooth-running of the local community.¹⁹⁶

This can also be seen at Knightley, one of eight manors in the parish of Gnosall in Staffordshire, which was acquired by the Blounts with the marriage of Katherine Peshall to John Blount of Kinlet in 1491.¹⁹⁷ In 1377, 88 residents of Gnosall manor were assessed as

¹⁹¹ TNA PROB 11/43/182; TNA PROB 11/51/110. Thomas's will thanks Ralph 'for his painstaking in my sickness'. Edward's will was a deathbed one.

¹⁹² TNA STAC3/3/37.

¹⁹³ Hindle, *State and Social Change*, 108.

¹⁹⁴ For example, Archer, *Pursuit of Stability*, 63 notes that parish communities in London were largely self-regulating due to the extent of office holding.

¹⁹⁵ TNA STAC3/3/37.

¹⁹⁶ Duffy, *Voices of Morebath*, 31, 49, 63.

¹⁹⁷ *Gnosall Parish Registers*, ed. P.W.L. Adams (Staffordshire Parish Registers Society), i.

being liable for the poll tax, with £1 9s 4d due in tax, with Knightley being a similar size with 73 people taxed and £1 4s 4d due to the crown.¹⁹⁸ In 1381 the majority of residents on both manors were farmers, with the sums assessed small, indicating that the manor was relatively unstratified with regards to wealth. Like Kinlet, some surnames can be traced through the centuries, such as the Whitgreves and Meison (or Mestons), who were resident in 1381, the late fifteenth century and the mid-sixteenth century.¹⁹⁹ Members of the Bannaster family also appear in the fourteenth-century poll tax returns, while a William Bannaster lived there in 1523.²⁰⁰ The Blounts and, later, their successors the Lacons, were involved in the local community, with one widow, Thomasine Stevenson, who lived in Gnosall, bequeathing to Edward Bould of Bouldon in her will of 1596 ‘all those books or writings that I have of Mr Rowland Lacon of Wilton Esquire’.²⁰¹ Her will was witnessed by a clerk named William Jennings of Gnosall, who had served as executor to Katherine Blount along with her son, Sir George Blount of Kinlet, following her death in 1540.²⁰² Gnosall manor had belonged to the church of Gnosall, with four messuages held by the Blounts.²⁰³ After the dissolution, Sir George Blount of Kinlet took a lease of the manor, uniting the two main manors in the parish under his ownership. By 1573, George was holding the court baron at Gnosall and was the most prominent individual in the parish, although not usually resident there.²⁰⁴

¹⁹⁸ *Poll Taxes*, ed. Fenwick, 465.

¹⁹⁹ TNA C3/186/12; *Calendar of the Proceedings in Chancery, in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth vol II*, Mm5 no.35, Mm15 no.35; *The Manor and Manorial Records*, ed. Nathaniel Hone (London, 1906), 184 (Gnosall manor court, 30 Henry VI).

²⁰⁰ Warwickshire County Record Office CR 1291/237/1-2.

²⁰¹ TNA PROB 11/87/108.

²⁰² TNA C1/1134/49-51. Given the 56-year difference between the two sources, they may be two related men. A William Jennings also served as Gnosall’s curate between September and December 1615, making him the second or third priest of that name in the parish (*Gnosall Parish Registers*, ed. Adams, iii).

²⁰³ Erdeswick, *Staffordshire*, 143; *Manor and Manorial Records*, ed. Hone, 189 (Gnosall manor court, 14 Henry VII).

²⁰⁴ *Manor and Manorial Records*, ed. Hone, 190 (Gnosall manor court, 18 Elizabeth).

Manor court rolls survive for Gnosall from the reign of Henry VI until Elizabeth I, making it possible to look in detail at the political structure of the manor. During the late fifteenth century, the court was regularly convened by Sir Thomas Whetegreve, whose family name can be traced through the centuries at Gnosall.²⁰⁵ Surviving jury lists also show names of longstanding families, such as John Banaster, Hugh Miston and Thomas a Miston in 1492.²⁰⁶ There is also evidence of interrelatedness in the manor, with Humphrey Woolrich recorded as resident there in 1492.²⁰⁷ The Woolrich family were related to the wealthy Thomasine Stephenson, who died in 1596.²⁰⁸ A number of prominent families (as at Kinlet) were able to monopolise the important manorial offices, such as the Furniall and Bratt (or Brett) families, whose members were frequently appointed as surveyors of water courses.²⁰⁹ The degree of relatedness at Gnosall was such that, like Kinlet, it can be suggested that those lower down the social scale could gain indirect access to these appointments through kinship and other ties, even if most could not aspire to receiving the appointment themselves. There were also countless lower status offices which could be acquired by more lowly men and help extend their own prestige. As well as the two higher status roles of churchwarden that needed to be filled in the parish, there were the less socially desirable appointments of four sidesmen, four overseers of the poor and eight surveyors of the highway, amongst other offices, to be filled annually.²¹⁰ The sheer number of appointees required must have ensured that nearly everyone in the parish was related to someone in local office. Gnosall supports the picture presented at Kinlet, of a highly interrelated community – both through kinship and social links. These

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 26 (Gnosall manor court, 27 Henry VI).

²⁰⁶ Ibid., (Gnosall manor court, 7 Hen VII).

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ TNA PROB 11/87/108. She refers to ‘my cozen Thomas Wolrich my godsone and son to my cosen John Wolriche’.

²⁰⁹ *Manor and Manorial Records*, ed. Hone, 194 (Gnosall Manor Court, 20 Elizabeth).

²¹⁰ *Gnosall Parish Registers*, ed. Adams, vii.

links are crucial to an analysis of the local political culture and potentially gave even lower status individuals influence and power through indirect networks.

The evidence of Kinlet and Gnosall supports a nuanced picture of access to local political influence. Wrightson considered that ‘clearly, social relations in parishes criss-crossed the social scale’, noting that access to higher roles in the community were difficult for those of lower status to access.²¹¹ This can be seen at Kinlet, which makes it clear that the potential for indirect access to the higher roles through kinship and social links should also not be underestimated. As Christopher Dyer noted for the medieval period, patronage was also important amongst the peasants of the medieval village, with the wealthier peasants patronising their poorer neighbours, something which gave them access to the channels of administration.²¹² This can be seen at Kinlet and Gnosall.

Local Political Office

The most prominent local role in both the medieval and early modern periods was that of Sheriff, who presided over parliamentary elections and supervised the Justices of the Peace, amongst other functions. A Sheriff’s term lasted one year, with the office a time-consuming one, requiring them to be physically present in the county. It was also an office to which only the most prominent men of the county were appointed, with appointments made by the king or his officers. Blount family members periodically served as Sheriffs throughout the period under study here, highlighting their acknowledged local prominence. In the fifteenth century, Sir Humphrey Blount of Kinlet (d.1477) served in Shropshire in 1461, 1467 and 1475. His

²¹¹Wrightson, ‘Politics of the Parish’, 19.

²¹² Dyer, ‘English Medieval Village Community’, 421.

son, Sir Thomas Blount (d.1524), served there in 1480, 1494, 1502 and 1518, while he was also Sheriff of Herefordshire, alongside his brother-in-law, Edward Croft, in 1509.²¹³ His heir, Sir John Blount (d.1531) only had one term as Sheriff of Shropshire, in 1530, and died during his office. He had earlier served as Sheriff of Staffordshire in 1526.²¹⁴ John's son, Sir George Blount (d.1581), served in Shropshire in 1563 and Staffordshire in 1552 and 1572, while his heir, Rowland Lacon, served in Shropshire in 1571. His son, Sir Francis Lacon, was Sheriff of Shropshire in 1611. While both Humphrey and his son, Thomas, served as Sheriffs of Shropshire considerably more often than Thomas's son, John, and grandson, George, did in the later sixteenth century, it is clear that there was no actual drop in the Blounts of Kinlet's willingness to serve. Instead, John and George, who were both substantial landowners in Staffordshire, divided their service between the two counties. All four generations of the Blounts discussed above served as a county Sheriff for approximately one year out of every decade of their lives after reaching the age of around thirty. There is therefore nothing to suggest that patterns of service changed. The decennial regularity with which members of the Blount family served suggests a sharing out of this burdensome role amongst those qualified to hold it, rather than an appointment willingly entered into.²¹⁵

Although the appointment of the Sheriff was ostensibly a central one, the nominations most likely came from information garnered from other members of the local community, with it in the interests of other leaders of local society to nominate their 'clients, companions and

²¹³ *L&P* 1, 664.

²¹⁴ History of Parliament Online (<http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1509-1558/member/blount-john-1471-1531>, accessed 1 August 2016).

²¹⁵ Michael, Braddick, *State Formation in Early Modern England c.1550-1700* (Cambridge, 2000), 30. As A. Hassell Smith, *County and Court: Government and Politics in Norfolk, 1558-1603* (Oxford, 1974), 139 notes, sheriffs were barred from reappointment within two years of a previous term ending.

kin' to local office.²¹⁶ Such appointments were therefore collaborative, with the government reliant on those identified as the most locally prominent men. Sir Thomas Blount's appointment to collect a tax subsidy in 1524 in Stottesdon Hundred, for example, while made by the king, was clearly based on the understanding of his prominence in the hundred in which Kinlet was situated.²¹⁷ There is no evidence – from the Blounts at least – of any change in the way that appointments were made in the period under consideration.

It has been asserted that the role of Sheriff was in decline in the late medieval and early modern period, thanks both to an increase in prominence of the role of the Justices of the Peace and to increasing centralisation.²¹⁸ However, such claims have been challenged, with Myron Noonkester identifying evidence for increasingly closer relations between the crown and the shrivalty from the 1530s onwards, with members of the royal household frequently appointed.²¹⁹ Very few records relating to members of the Blount family's terms of office survive, although the evidence that does supports a view of the role retaining at least local political importance. George Blount used his position as Sheriff of Staffordshire in 1553 to influence the outcome of a contested parliamentary election (see chapter 3), indicating that there was still a potential for the role to be a source of local power.²²⁰ On the very limited evidence, it seems arguable that the position had always been one of potentially great local authority, albeit that it was also a role – being the most prominent in the counties – that was kept under the eye of central government. George's great-grandfather, Humphrey Peshall,

²¹⁶ Richard Gorski, *The Fourteenth-Century Sheriff: English Local Administration in the Late Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2003), 13.

²¹⁷ *Shropshire Taxes in the Reign of Henry VIII*, ed. Michael Faraday (Walton on Thames, 2015), 26.

²¹⁸ Acheson, *Gentry Community*, 110; Braddick, *State Formation*, 30; Gladwin, *Sheriff*, 268.

²¹⁹ Myron Noonkester, 'Dissolution of the Monasteries and the decline of the sheriff', *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 23 (1992), 677-698.

²²⁰ A.H. Anderson, 'Henry, Lord Stafford (1501-1563) in local and central government', *The English Historical Review*, 78 (1963), 225-242.

used the office to build and maintain his own local position, with a suit brought by John Delves to the Crown in 1464 requesting, in a relation to a legal case he had brought, that ‘since the process had begun one Humfrey Peshale, armingier, had been appointed Sheriff of co Stafford, and that Humfrey had married Anne, the sister of Elena, the wife of the said John, and he asked, therefore, that a writ might be addressed to the Coroner to summon a jury in place of the Sheriff’.²²¹ He evidently did not think that he would receive a fair hearing from Humphrey Peshall in the Sheriff’s court.²²² In both examples members of the family were prepared to use their office for local political gain or in local disputes, albeit that both too were also subject to potential intervention from the central government.²²³ The Sheriff served as an important link between the Crown and the localities, with this continuing into the Tudor period.²²⁴

As well as serving as Sheriff, Blounts regularly took on the role of Justice of the Peace both in Shropshire and Staffordshire. This was an important local role, which dates from the fourteenth century and had previously developed from the earlier keepers of the peace.²²⁵ They had a very wide range of responsibilities, including assisting the Assize judges with criminal matters, with the Justices meeting at Quarter Sessions four times a year.²²⁶ This

²²¹ George Wrottesley, ed., ‘Extracts from the Plea Rolls, 34 Henry VI to 14 Edw IV, inclusive’, *Collections for a History of Staffordshire*, New Series, 4 (1901), 126.

²²² The two men were brothers-in-law, again demonstrating the need for detailed analysis of family and friendship relationships when considering local political culture.

²²³ Gorski, *Fourteenth-Century Sheriff*, 1.

²²⁴ Helen Maud Cam, *Liberties and Communities in Medieval England, Collected Studies in Local Administration and Topography* (Cambridge, 1944), 28; Chris Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages* (London, 1987), 247; Gladwin, *Sheriff*, 270; Gorski, *Fourteenth-Century Sheriff*, 3; Frederic William Maitland, *The Constitutional History of England* (Cambridge, 1908), 233-4; Nigel Saul, *Knights and Esquires: The Gloucestershire Gentry in the Fourteenth Century* (Oxford, 1981), 111-3; Noonkester, ‘Dissolution of the Monasteries’, 685.

²²⁵ J.G. Jones, *Law, Order and Government in Caernarfonshire 1558-1640* (Cardiff, 1996), 31; Bertram Osborne, *Justices of the Peace 1361-1848* (Shaftesbury, 1960), 30; R.E. Swift, ‘The English Magistracy Past and Present’ in David Cox and Barry Godfrey (eds.), *Cinderellas and Packhorses: A History of the Shropshire Magistracy* (Trowbridge, 2005), 1-12.

²²⁶ Sharpe, *Crime in Early Modern England*, 28-30.

workload increased significantly in the sixteenth century, including growing administrative functions, such as the administration of poor relief, dealing with vagrants, enforcing fair weights and measures and the maintenance of bridges.²²⁷ They would also work closely with parish constables and churchwardens, giving them important links to those lower down the social scale. Numbers of Justices per county varied substantially and there was no uniform system in place, with them instead nominated due to their local prominence.²²⁸ Christopher Harrison's contention that the continuing vibrancy of manor courts suggests that the role of the Justices in county governance is overstated is difficult to sustain in light of the increasing powers granted to the Justices in the period, with the two institutions existing alongside each other.²²⁹

Commissions of the Peace were royal appointments and, as such, have been suggested as one of the means by which the central government imposed its will on the localities, with appointments desirable enough that the Justices complied in order to ensure that they were named on the next commission.²³⁰ Wrightson has suggested that this could lead to the legislative prescription as embodied by the Justices as being at odds with local society at times, although the enactment of their role was subject to local negotiation, particularly in relation to the officers who assisted the Justices.²³¹ It is indisputable that the Commissions of the Peace were issued by the Crown and that the ultimate decision for who was named lay with the monarch. However ideas that the central government's policies were enforced due to

²²⁷ Cooper, *Houses of the Gentry*, 8; Jones, *Order and Government in Caernarfonshire*, 113.

²²⁸ Osborne, *Justices*, 30.

²²⁹ Harrison, 'Manor Courts', 55.

²³⁰ Geoffrey Elton, *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics and Government, vol IV: Papers and Reviews 1982-1990* (Cambridge, 1992), 13-14.

²³¹ Keith Wrightson, 'Two concepts of order: justices, constables and jurymen in seventeenth-century England' in Brewer, John and Styles, John, eds., *An Ungovernable People: The English and their Law in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London, 1983), 21-46.

competition for places on the commission is debatable given the sheer number of places that needed to be filled on the commission.²³² Unlike the Sheriff or the parliamentary knights of the shire, commissions of the peace required a large cohort, even ignoring the prestige appointments of the nobility and the higher clergy.²³³ It is not enough to assert, as Bertram Osborne did in his influential study, that the Tudor Justices ‘were the gentry’, since as set out above that category was immensely broad and admitted many different levels of men.²³⁴ Statutes dating from the medieval period limited just who should be appointed, requiring that they should be drawn from ‘the most sufficient knights, esquires and gentlemen of the law’ who resided in the county in question and owned a freehold estate worth at least £20.²³⁵ This considerably narrowed the pool of those eligible to take the role: gentlemen such as Robert Blount of Eckington, for example, would not qualify. Indeed, in the last years of the fifteenth century we would expect to see only Sir Thomas Blount of Kinlet (from amongst the Blounts) fulfilling the requirements in Shropshire. In the Elizabethan period only Sir George Blount of Kinlet and his cousins the Blounts of Astley held sufficient property in the county. There were a great many other members of the family in those periods who were accounted gentry but did not satisfy the property requirement. In the tax subsidy of 1524 for Shropshire, for which a considerable number of the returns survive, only twelve named individuals satisfy the land ownership requirement.²³⁶ Partial document survival rates means that this is not an accurate record of the potential Justices at that time, but it does indicate the comparative rarity of the Justice of the Peace class compared to the other residents of the county. This limited pool was nothing new. Eric Acheson has noted in relation to fifteenth-century

²³² Acheson, *Gentry Community*, 131.

²³³ Acheson, *Gentry Community*, 130; Elton, *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics IV*, 14.

²³⁴ Osborne, *Justices*, 27. Hassell Smith noted in relation to Elizabethan Norfolk that the vast majority of Justices were knights and esquires rather than mere gentleman, but his analysis that this was due to the desire that Justices ‘should have been drawn from families which had already distinguished themselves in public service’ overlooks the simple fact that the vast majority of gentlemen below the rank of esquire did not fulfil the financial requirements to hold the role (Hassell Smith, *County and Court*, 53).

²³⁵ Acheson, *Gentry Community*, 129; Jones, *Order and Government*, 31; Swift, ‘English Magistracy’, 2.

²³⁶ *Shropshire Taxes*, ed. Michael Faraday.

Leicestershire, that the active Justices were drawn from a small number of local families, even in light of an increasing trend towards larger commissions.²³⁷ This allowed for greater involvement for local individuals in local affairs, but it arguably also fettered the ability of the king to control the Justices and, thus, the localities through the selection process.²³⁸ The places had, after all, to be filled.

Quarter Session records do not survive in Shropshire and Staffordshire in the Tudor period, so it is impossible to carry out any analysis of the role of the Blounts as Justices. However, eligible members of the family were named so regularly on commissions that they cannot have seen the role as anything other than their due as members of the county elite. Sir Thomas Blount was listed as a Justice of the Peace for Shropshire on all seven commissions between 1509 and 1514, with the men named numbering between twenty-three and twenty-nine in that period.²³⁹ Thomas's heir, John, served as Justice of the Peace for Shropshire from 1529 until his death in 1531.²⁴⁰ At the same time, both Thomas and his eldest son, John, served on Commissions of the Peace for Staffordshire, where they also held lands (and where John was a substantial landholder in right of his wife, Katherine Peshall). Both men were named on all seven commissions between 1509 and 1514. John served again for Staffordshire between 1520 and 1526.²⁴¹ Sir John's son, Sir George Blount, served as a Justice of the Peace for Shropshire and Worcestershire between 1547 and 1558 and again in Shropshire from 1564 until his death in 1581.²⁴² His nephew and heir, Rowland Lacon, was a Justice of the

²³⁷ Acheson, *Gentry Community*, 131.

²³⁸ Cooper, *Houses of the Gentry*, 8; Acheson, *Gentry Community*, 131.

²³⁹ *L&P* 1, Appendix 1.

²⁴⁰ History of Parliament Online, <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1509-1558/member/blount-john-1471-1531>, accessed 25/08/17.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

²⁴² History of Parliament Online, <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1509-1558/member/blount-sir-george-151213-81>, accessed 25/08/17.

Peace between 1573 and 1584 and again in 1595. His son, Sir Francis Lacon, served as Justice of the Peace from 1608 until 1624/5. Obviously, there are gaps in service. Reasons for a failure to serve may not be visible in the records: Sir Thomas Blount's last commission was in 1514 when he was in his mid-sixties. There is no evidence that he had fallen into disfavour by the time of his death in 1524. He was Sheriff of Shropshire in 1518, received a re-grant of his stewardship of the royal manor of Bewdley in 1519 and attended the king at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520.²⁴³ He was also named on a commission to enquire into wardships and marriages in Shropshire in May 1515.²⁴⁴ Old age and infirmity is a possible reason for his failure to serve in the onerous role of Justice, although not something that is visible in the records. Sir John Blount was not a Justice between 1514 and 1520, but was clearly still in royal favour: he was then serving as one of the king's Spears and required to reside at court. In 1526-7 he was serving as Sheriff of Staffordshire, before he relocated to Shropshire following the death of his father and the settlement of a dispute over that estate. He became a Justice in Shropshire almost immediately. Religion may have played a role in Sir George Blount's removal in 1558 but it was not a permanent one.²⁴⁵ George, who would be listed as a recusant in 1577, returned as a Justice for Shropshire in 1564 and served for the remaining seventeen years of his life. Catholicism has similarly been advanced as the reason for Rowland Lacon's failure to serve in 1584 and 1587, but he too was reappointed in 1591.²⁴⁶ There was simply too small a pool of qualified men available for the Crown to be too selective in who was named. If the Crown really had sought to control the Justice's mandate, they would presumably have relaxed the landowning requirement to allow the lesser gentry to participate as, indeed, was done in Wales. That this was not done suggests strongly that both

²⁴³ *L&P* 3, 79, 703.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 523.

²⁴⁵ J.H. Gleason, *The Justices of the Peace in England 1558 to 1640* (Oxford, 1969), 71, 209.

²⁴⁶ <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1558-1603/member/lacon-roland-1537-1608>, accessed 10/03/18.

the government and the local communities accepted that the upper gentry were the people most apt to serve as Justices, regardless of whether or not they followed or even supported centralised policies: local prestige and power therefore outweighed government policy in this instance.

In his important study, J.H. Gleason characterised the Justices as the ‘rulers of the countryside in Tudor and Stuart England’ and this seems apt.²⁴⁷ The requirements for service and the number required to fill the commissions, along with the local administrative role they played, ensured that the role of the Justice of the Peace was primarily of local importance, particularly considering the prominence given to keeping the peace in concepts of neighbourliness and local politics in the period.²⁴⁸ This can be seen, too, with the role of the Sheriff, another appointment where the monarch’s discretion was fettered by the available candidates and local political considerations. The Sheriff and the Justices cannot be viewed in isolation from the community in which they served. Their continued existence and expansion of the roles in the sixteenth century, ensured that much of the politics and authority at work in the countryside remained local. This is not to say that these local communities existed isolated from the centre – the men who served as Sheriff or as Justices were a natural point of contact with the Crown, indeed many held court appointments or had family or social links with the monarch, but it is clear that their local political role was also of fundamental importance in the way that the offices were sought and negotiated in the period.

²⁴⁷ Gleason, *Justices of the Peace*, 116.

²⁴⁸ Hindle, ‘Public peace’, 218; Jones, *Order and Government*, 113. Dominic Lockett, ‘Crown patronage and political morality in early Tudor England: the case of Giles, Lord Daubeney’, *English Historical Review*, 110 (1995), 578-595.

Conclusion

The Blounts, as a family, were as economically tied to the manor as their tenants. Although in all the periods under study here there are hints at diversification, these represented only a small facet of their activities: Sir George Blount's income came primarily from sheep, pigs and arable crops, just as his grandfather, Sir Thomas Blount and great-grandfather, Humphrey Blount's, had done. As part of this, the manor remained a central focus of local communities, both economic and social, albeit that it existed alongside the increasingly important parish. Boundaries had always been fluid and the interplay between the parish and the manor at Kinlet shows little sign of real change from the fifteenth to the sixteenth centuries.

It has long been recognised that the localities were made up of closely linked social groups, with the lower members of society still important in providing legitimacy for their social superiors.²⁴⁹ The community living at Kinlet, Earnwood and Highley was dominated by Kinlet's lord, who was by far the wealthiest member of the community. Below them, society was becoming increasingly stratified in the sixteenth century, with a group of prosperous families who were long established on the manor tending to take the most important appointments, such as churchwardens, and monopolising juries. There was, however, considerable contact between all levels of society, with intermarriage and social links providing indirect access to authority for those lower down the social ranking. The Blounts had very deep roots in their local community, which stretched down to the yeomanry. To ignore these kinship and social links is to misunderstand the nature of late medieval and sixteenth-century rural society.

²⁴⁹ Wrightson, 'Politics of the Parish', 32.

At the same time, gentility and how it was characterised and understood was intricately nuanced in the period. While the upper gentry were closely tied to landownership, this was not necessarily a defining feature of the lower gentry. For the Blounts of Eckington, gentility was a privileged status based on family and social connections, but which did not in itself provide (or indicate) wealth or position. Robert Blount of Eckington lived his daily life in much the same way as his yeoman neighbours, right down to the fines he paid for failing to ring his pigs. He transmitted his own gentility to his equally landless sons, with it only in the third generation that the status was apparently lost.

Finally, office holding was of crucial importance to local political status and incorporated the upper gentry into their community. Service was expected of everyone from the highest to the lowest. Different levels took on different roles, with the yeomen, for example, serving as churchwardens and the lords as Justices. All, however, were part of the same local system of governance, with the higher offices in turn points of contact with the central government, albeit that ideas of the Crown using appointments to Commissions of the Peace as a means of enforcing their will are problematic due to the limited number of eligible men and the large size of the commissions to be filled. The Blounts suggest that much of the importance of the Commissions of the Peace and appointments to the shrievalty lay in the local political status they conveyed, albeit that this status was, of course, conferred by the central government.

This analysis of the Blounts within their local context makes it clear that there was a very significant local political culture in the period, characterised both by change and continuity in areas of life. The communities in which they lived were remarkably stable in their personnel

and, while highly stratified, the sheer number of local offices and the highly interconnected nature of communities potentially gave everyone a stake in local governance, as well as some level of contact (albeit potentially mediated through local connections) with the central government.

Chapter 2: The Use of the Law Courts in the Localities and the Centre

The sixteenth century was a litigious period, with most levels of society able to access the courts or some level of legal expertise, particularly in relation to life stages, such as marriage and death, and in particular in defence of either honour or property.¹ The concept of the rule of law, which defined rights and duties, as well as the processes by which they could be obtained and enforced, was a widespread and important part of early modern English political and legal thought, with the law characterised as subordinating everyone from the monarch downwards.² Parliament, as the most formal source of the law, was conceived by contemporary theorists as the highest court, with its legislation enforced by the courts beneath it in status.³ It was not, however, the only source of law-making in the period, with would-be litigants able to choose from a wide variety of legal forums.

Society's litigiousness has been interpreted as a symptom of social disharmony, but the prevailing historiography now highlights the use of legal suits to resolve conflict, something which is demonstrated by the high number of proceedings settled out of court or through arbitration.⁴ This analysis can be taken further, with James Sharpe considering that the law courts can therefore be seen 'performing a function both for the state, and for the individual and his or her community'.⁵ Other historians, too, acknowledge the social function of the

¹ Hindle, 'Public Peace', 218; William Jones, 'Due process', 123; Stretton, *Women Waging Law*, 6; Sharpe, 'Such Disagreements', 182; Sharpe, 'The People and the Law', 246, 247, 250; Brooks, *Pettyfoggers and Vipers*, 48; Brooks, *Lawyers, Litigation and English Society*, 2; Brooks, 'Interpersonal Conflict', 360.

² Sharpe, 'The People and the Law', 244-270; Elton, *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics II*, 277; Steven Gunn, *Henry VII's New Men and the Making of Tudor England* (Oxford, 2016), 21.

³ 'An Exhortation to the Jurye' in Anthony Fitzherbert and Richard Crompton, *L'Office et Auctoritie de Justices de Peace* (1584).

⁴ Sharpe, 'The People and the Law', 253; Cust and Hopper, *Duelling*, 169; Outhwaite, *English Ecclesiastical Courts*, 2; Hindle, 'Public peace', 213; Brooks, *Lawyers, Litigation and English Society*, 12.

⁵ Sharpe, 'Such Disagreements', 187.

courts as being of particular importance.⁶ While Christopher Brooks considered that legal history commonly viewed the law as an instrument of the state, such conceptions have changed with an increasing awareness of its social function.⁷ For Brodie Waddell, for example, manor courts in the period promoted the maintenance of stability, with the management of agricultural and communal resources a particular focus.⁸ The use made of the courts by members of the Blount family and their manorial tenants will provide additional support to these views of the considerable social function of the courts, with it clear that legal cases could involve a very wide cross-set of society and were of paramount importance in negotiating and settling disputes in the local area.

While in 1996 Christopher Hill was able to conceive of the seventeenth-century legal process as a tool of the ruling elites used by the gentry to oppress the local population, there had already been a considerable body of work that had recognised the wide participation in law by social groups below the rank of gentry.⁹ Douglas Hay's work on eighteenth-century criminal law has been particularly influential, with its emphasis on the interdependence of all ranks of society as essential to an understanding of the way in which the law functioned and was administered.¹⁰ Building on this, Cynthia Herrup highlights the necessity of looking at the priorities that underpinned legal choices rather than the recorded decisions and that the law and the courts cannot be studied in isolation.¹¹ Herrup's work has highlighted the fact that justice was not merely imposed on the population from the top down, with legal offices

⁶ Bailey, 'Voices in Court', 392; Herrup, 'Law and Morality', 103; Brooks and Lobban, 'Introduction', xxi; Brooks, *Pettyfoggers and Vipers*, 2.

⁷ Brooks, *Lawyers, Litigation and English Society*, 179.

⁸ Waddell, 'Governing England', 289.

⁹ Christopher Hill, *Liberty Against the Law: Some Seventeenth-Century Controversies* (London, 1996), 338; Brooks, *Lawyers, Litigation and English Society*, 5.

¹⁰ Douglas Hay, 'Property, Authority and the Criminal Law' in Douglas Hay, Peter Linebaugh, John G. Rule, E.P. Thompson and Cal Winslow (eds.), *Albion's Fatal Tree* (London, 1975), 17-64.

¹¹ Herrup, 'Law and Morality', 103.

widely dispersed through the social scale in local communities and that, therefore, ‘legal decisions reflected not gentry values, but the common ground between the values of the legal elite, the gentry and the local men of middling status’.¹² Similar conclusions, too, have been drawn by Garthine Walker in relation to her work on the criminal courts.¹³ In the 1970s, widespread litigation was increasingly viewed as evidence of a decline in local community relations.¹⁴ Over the past thirty years, however, this view has been challenged, with historians such as Sharpe, Herrup, and Steve Hindle characterising the law as performing a function for the state, the individual and for their local communities, with the law used – on a local level – as a means of promoting harmony and cohesion and within the context of community social values.¹⁵ It is therefore crucial to consider the law through the context of the local communities in which it was grounded, something in which the Blounts and their communities, as a case study, can be important.

This blurring of legal and social spheres in the period has led historians, such as Christopher Brooks and Michael Lobban, to consider it crucial for early modern historians ‘to take seriously the ongoing importance of that part of the legal life of the realm which took place beyond Westminster Hall’.¹⁶ A wide range of courts existed in the sixteenth century, including criminal, ecclesiastical and civil.¹⁷ The continuing prominence of local custom and law making has drawn attention from historians, with Keith Wrightson considering tension between legislation (as produced by the central government) and local custom a recognised area of concern for contemporaries, with law enforcement in the localities considered vital to

¹² Ibid., 107.

¹³ Walker, *Crime, Gender and Social Order*, 1.

¹⁴ Lawrence Stone, ‘Interpersonal violence in English society’, *Past and Present*, 101 (1983), 22-33.

¹⁵ Sharpe, *Such Disagreements*, 180, 187; Hindle, ‘Public peace’, 213.

¹⁶ Brooks and Lobban, ‘Introduction’, xxi.

¹⁷ Outhwaite, *English Ecclesiastical Courts*, 2; Sharpe, ‘The People and the Law’, 254.

avoid conflict.¹⁸ Such a view underlines the continuing importance of local law making and law enforcement. Local courts, such as the manor court, retained their importance, with Christopher Harrison considering that ‘Tudor England could not be governed without manor courts or similar local jurisdictions: the administration of justice both criminal and civil was impossible without them’.¹⁹ Waddell, too, has drawn similar conclusions, seeing manor courts as versatile and resilient institutions which were central to local governance.²⁰ As such, the manor court – which is frequently conceived of as the lowliest of the legal courts in the period – could be of major importance in the localities.

Christopher Brooks has also highlighted the considerable expansion of the central court system in the period, although this varied between the different courts.²¹ The common law courts (most notably the Court of the King’s Bench and the Court of Common Pleas) saw a decline in usage in the early sixteenth century, before a considerable increase in the cases they handled after 1560, but they always remained the most important courts in England, hearing by far the most business.²² Chancery experienced no early Tudor decline and its business may have doubled during the reign of Elizabeth I.²³ Star Chamber showed a similar trend.²⁴ Brooks attributes this to increasing numbers of people from below the rank of gentry making use of the central courts.²⁵ This does not, however, suggest that people’s conceptions of justice became more centralised. As Brooks notes, ‘an argument that the London courts were not all-pervasive in 1560 is surprising only if the multitude of other jurisdictions in

¹⁸ Wrightson, ‘Two Concepts of Order’, 25.

¹⁹ Harrison, ‘Manor Courts’, 59.

²⁰ Waddell, ‘Governing England’, 279.

²¹ C.W. Brooks, ‘Interpersonal Conflict and Social Tension: Civil Litigation in England, 1640-1830’ in A.L. Beier, David Cannadine and James M. Rosenheim (eds.), *The First Modern Society: Essays in English History in Honour of Lawrence Stone* (Cambridge, 1989), 357-399; Brooks, *Pettyfoggers and Vipers*, 56.

²² Brooks, *Lawyers, Litigation and English Society*, 9-10.

²³ Brooks, *Pettyfoggers and Vipers*, 54

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁵ Brooks, *Lawyers, Litigation and English Society*, 15-16, 22.

existence at this time are ignored. In fact, no institutions were more ubiquitous in early modern England than courts of law, and those at Westminster made up only a small, if important, minority of them'.²⁶ At the same time, even where an individual chose to issue in a central court, it was possible that none of the parties would need to leave the localities, with litigants able to appoint an attorney to act on their behalf in London.²⁷ Similarly, as Brooks has identified, most central courts relied upon local administration in order to function, particularly since the range of cases they heard could span the country.²⁸ It is widely established then, by historians such as Brooks, Waddell and Harrison, that while the business heard by the central courts increased from at least the mid-sixteenth century, with an expansion of lower status individuals making use of them, there remained a thriving local court system which retained considerable importance. At the same time, much of the day-to-day administration of the central courts took place in the localities, with it therefore clear that any discussion of the law courts in the period and their social function must look at the ways in which the law was viewed, used and conceived of in the localities. This is explored in relation to the Blounts and their local area in this chapter, where the occupants of Kinlet and other Blount family manors carefully selected the court in which they issued, with their decision shaped by the likelihood of success, the perceived ability of any given court to enforce judgment, and local political pressures to which they were subject.

Litigation's pervasiveness allows for consideration of the role of women in the legal process. Women's political agency has been increasingly recognised in the period, with the work of Barbara Harris, James Daybell, Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford particularly important

²⁶ Brooks, *Pettyfoggers and Vipers*, 33

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

on political networks, along with the conclusions drawn from gentry studies, such as Vivienne Larminie's study of the Newdigates of Arbury.²⁹ Indeed, as Harris notes, there was often a clash between the legal and cultural subordination of women and the actual facts of their lives.³⁰ Maria Cioni and Tim Stretton's work on the Elizabethan Chancery and the Elizabethan Court of Records respectively has been particularly important in identifying the considerable use that women made of the central courts, often acting independently in matters, albeit that their participation was on a lower level than men's and that there were bars to their access.³¹ As Stretton has argued, 'in Elizabeth's reign the total number of women suing and being sued in the central courts was impressively high, for a system that many historians regard as the sheet anchor of patriarchal authority and institutionalised discrimination against women in this period'.³² Cioni considers that the increasing numbers of female litigants in the Chancery courts as the sixteenth century progressed demonstrates changing social attitudes towards women and their rights.³³ However, while women did have access to the law courts, this must be set against the very considerable disadvantages that women faced within a patriarchal society, with a man's word carrying more weight than a woman's in court, for example.³⁴ Women of the Blount family were heavily involved in legal disputes, as set out below, but their use of the courts continued to reflect the prevailing social structure, with married women only very rarely suing or being sued without their husband as a joint party. As such, it is difficult to see such evidence as an indication of pronounced social change – women had always had some level of access to the law courts, with an increase in

²⁹ Daybell, 'Rethinking Women', 3; Barbara Harris, *English Aristocratic Women* (Oxford, 2002), 3; Barbara Harris, 'Sisterhood, Friendship and the Power of English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550' in Daybell, *Women and Politics*, 21-50; Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early-Modern England*, 6; Larminie, *Wealth, Kinship and Culture*, 36; Harris, *Women and Politics*, 274.

³⁰ Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, 243.

³¹ Amy Louise Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (London, 1993), 116; Stretton, *Women Waging Law*, 216.

³² Stretton, *Women Waging Law*, 218.

³³ Maria Cioni, 'The Elizabethan Chancery and Women's Rights' in Delloyd J. Guth and John W. McKenna (eds.), *Tudor Rule and Revolution, Essays for G.R. Elton from his American Friends* (Cambridge, 1982), 159.

³⁴ Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 5.

female litigants in the sixteenth century due more to an increase in court business which will be discussed below. Nonetheless, the position of women in relation to *providing* justice rather than *seeking* it, as in the case of Katherine Blount, does require further analysis since the role of a woman in convening a manorial court can potentially illustrate wider attitudes to female rule in the period.

The sources used for this chapter and other studies of the sixteenth-century court system are almost entirely court records.³⁵ It is acknowledged that care should be taken when using them since the words were often composed and spoken by lawyers.³⁶ However, Joanne Bailey has been cautiously optimistic, suggesting that in some cases it is possible to recover the voice of the original litigants, albeit that the picture they present may be distorted and should be supplemented, where possible, by other sources.³⁷ It is acknowledged here that legal records are, by their nature, adversarial, and will have been created through the mediation of lawyers and other interested parties. However, it is clear from a careful study of the records relating to the Blounts that the records do allow for cautious conclusions to be drawn regarding a number of topics even as it is recognised that the content of the documents are frequently formulaic. As such, the records of legal cases involving the Blounts and their neighbours allow for further analysis of local politics, interaction with the centre and local community relations in the long sixteenth century.

³⁵ Bailey, 'Voices in Court', 392.

³⁶ Stretton, *Women Waging Law*, 11-19; Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford, 1996), 41-54.

³⁷ Bailey, 'Voices in Court', 393, 407-8.

Justice in the Localities

Most litigation in the period was dealt with in the localities, with the manor court arguably the most fundamental source of local justice for both criminal and civil matters. In the sixteenth century, Kinlet's lord often presided over the courts baron for Cleobury Mortimer, which dealt with business from neighbouring manors and parishes, including Kinlet. These were held every few weeks.³⁸ In the earliest surviving records for the court, held on 1 November 1509, Sir Thomas Blount presided, with the jury drawn from most of the area's prominent yeomen families.³⁹ Business during that session included assessments of the value of the local manors, as well as fines to be paid, a confirmation of an assignment of wagons and carts and an agreement made between manorial tenants.

Sir Thomas Blount's courts baron were sometimes restricted to those manors held by him or his relatives in Shropshire, with a court from early in Henry VIII's reign dealing with matters concerning Sodington, Highley (where he held land), Rock, Earnwood, Bitterley and Kinlet.⁴⁰ Blounts did not always preside over the Cleobury Mortimer court baron, with other men presiding on 17 October 1512 when sums due to the manor of Cleobury Mortimer (which was not held by the Blounts) from tenants were agreed.⁴¹ Similarly, Thomas presided over the court in August and late November 1519, but not an earlier court in November 1519 or on 28 January 1520 when the business heard did not concern his own interests.⁴² Court records suggest that an official presence in the manor court as juror or judge could be an advantage in relation to an individual's own interests or those of their kin: it surely assisted John Smyth

³⁸ Shropshire Archives *Calendar of Deeds and Charters* no.6387.

³⁹ Shropshire Archives 3320 Childe 56/1A-1B.

⁴⁰ Shropshire Archives 3320 Childe 56/2.

⁴¹ Shropshire Archives 3320 Childe 56/3.

⁴² Shropshire Archives 3320/Childe 56/4; 3320/Childe 56/3; 3320/Childe/56/5.

alias Browne, who brought a matter to the court in October 1565, that he was also the first named juror.⁴³ However, there does seem to have been some faith in due process and the rule of law even in the manor court, which is often characterised as the most basic level of the court system. Sir George Blount, for example, ordered that his cousin, Thomas Blount of Kidderminster, pay a fine in the court held on 2 October 1536, suggesting that judgments were not arbitrary – something which can be seen in the willingness of manorial tenants to appear as witnesses in cases against their lord.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, it seems unlikely that the lord or the juries could be relied upon to be entirely impartial in matters relating to their own affairs, something which must have been a consideration for litigants. The Blounts clearly had the social prestige necessary to be able to preside over the courts when it was in their interests to do so, giving them considerable legal power in the local area.

The court records for Sir John Blount's tenure as lord of Kinlet (between 1524 and 1531) do not survive. During his son George's minority, John's widow, Katherine, presided.⁴⁵ A woman presiding over such courts was rare, although not unheard of, since they were usually convened by the landholder.⁴⁶ It would, however, have been acceptable for George's steward to hold the courts rather than his mother, suggesting that Katherine chose to take over the local administration of Kinlet. Indeed, she appears to have more generally taken on the role of lord of the manor during her widowhood, as can be seen in a number of surviving documents, including depositions taken from some of her son George's tenants concerning a Chancery matter in which he was the defendant, with one claiming that the subject land had been held in a certain way 'both in Sir Thomas Blunts life, and my ladie Katherine Blunt's

⁴³ Shropshire Archives 3320 Childe 58/5 no.6.

⁴⁴ Shropshire Archives 3320 Childe 56/14.

⁴⁵ Shropshire Archives 3320 Childe 56/13.

⁴⁶ William Scroggs, *The Practice of Courts Leet, and Courts Baron* (London, 1728 – fourth edition); Giles Jacob, *The Complete Court Keeper or Land Steward's Assistant* (London, 1764).

tyne, and in Sir John Blunt's lyfe'.⁴⁷ Katherine, who divided her time between Kinlet and her own manor of Knightley in Staffordshire, held courts at Cleobury Mortimer with considerable regularity, with records surviving for 18 November 1532, 9 December 1532, 23 January 1533, 20 February 1533, 12 March 1533, 6 April 1533, 25 May 1533, 15 June 1533, 6 July 1533, 27 July 1533, 7 September 1533 and 28 September 1533.⁴⁸

It is significant that, as time passed, Katherine was increasingly referred to in court records without any reference to her deceased husband or son, suggesting that she was considered to have status in the local area independent of her role as deputy to her young son.⁴⁹ Studies of women's access to the law in the early modern period have tended to focus on their lack of rights, although this focus has begun to change with an increasing recognition that the courts also provided women with an arena to assert their rights independently.⁵⁰ This is usually discussed in relation to the centralised courts, although it is clear that – in the case of Katherine Blount at least – some women were able to make use of the manor courts. In her case, she was in a somewhat anomalous position in attempting to assert her place as lady of the manor. This has implications for studies of female authority, since it demonstrates the possibilities for women to overstep convention and act as judges in a local setting thanks to the vagaries of inheritance – echoing the position of the Crown in the late sixteenth century. The ability of a woman to take public office as monarch is usually characterised as an exception in Tudor England, but the ability of female landowners to also convene their own manor courts and given judgments – both criminal and civil – in their locality deserves

⁴⁷ TNA STAC3/3/37.

⁴⁸ Shropshire Archives 3320 Childe 56/13.

⁴⁹ For example, in the records for 15 June 1533, 7 September 1533 and 28 September 1533 there is no reference to John or George.

⁵⁰ Stretton, *Women Waging Law*, 3; Maria Cioni, *Women and Law in Elizabethan England with Particular Reference to the Court of Chancery* (New York, 1985); Cioni, 'Elizabethan Chancery', 159-182.

further study.⁵¹ This position is masked both by the relative rarity of female inheritance and the fact that heiresses were often married, with their husband taking on the role of lord of the manor. Indeed, the examples of Katherine's own struggle to secure her inheritance from her grandfather and her granddaughter, Dorothy Purslow's failure to inherit the Blount estates (discussed below), indicates that female inheritance was often resisted and frustrated.⁵² When Katherine convened Cleobury Mortimer's court baron, she heard cases that spanned the local area, not just in relation to her son's manor of Kinlet, demonstrating the extent of her local influence. Women might not sit as Justices of the Peace, but they could – as Katherine Blount shows – sit in judgment on their neighbours and tenants.

Women could also bring their own matters to the manor courts, indicating their participation in justice at all levels of society. A widow, Elizabeth Southall, who was a tenant in Kinlet, brought a matter before Sir George Blount in October 1565, for example.⁵³ Her son and daughter-in-law, George and Elizabeth, brought their own matter in February of the following year, with many other women appearing as plaintiffs or defendants in the records.⁵⁴ In his work in relation to the Elizabethan Court of Requests, Stretton has noted that, while the total number of women suing or being sued was 'impressively high', individual women brought lawsuits only in a small number of cases, instead usually appearing as joint litigants.⁵⁵ This picture is upheld by the evidence of the Blounts, where only widows, such as the widow of Humphrey Blount who sued her son over her dower, asserted their rights individually. Others always appeared in conjunction with their husbands, even where the dispute, as in Katherine Blount's case against her grandfather, Humphrey Peshall, concerned her own property. In the

⁵¹ Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 9; Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early-Modern England*, 357.

⁵² Eileen Spring, *Law, Land and Family: Aristocratic Inheritance in England, 1300-1800* (London, 1993), 148.

⁵³ Shropshire Archives 3320 Childe 58/5 no.6.

⁵⁴ Shropshire Archives 3320 Childe 58/5 no.7

⁵⁵ Stretton, *Women Waging Law*, 218.

Elizabethan Chancery matter of Ballard v. Bullock, the plaintiffs named John Bullock as the lead defendant although the matter concerned the earlier activities of John's new wife, Dorothy Blount of Kinlet and her deceased first husband, Roger Purslow, regarding her father's estate.⁵⁶ Claims, based on these appearances as joint claimants or defendants, that women of the period showed a 'reluctance to litigate' due to social pressures, should be tested.⁵⁷ While this can be interpreted as a limitation to women's abilities to use the courts, it is hardly surprising that married women – who had no independence at law – were sued and issued proceedings in conjunction with their husbands.⁵⁸ This does not, however, mean that it was not the women who were taking the lead in the matters. When Katherine Blount's mother and stepfather, Dame Isabel Peshall and John Russhe, took Chancery action on her behalf against her grandfather in the 1490s, the impetus for the claim almost certainly came from Isabel since it concerned her daughter's rights rather than her own. In the context of the wider Blount family, it is clear that women's participation in the law courts could be wide and important, something that has been recognised in other areas to have allowed women to play a significant part in the public life of their communities.⁵⁹ Manor court records stretching back deep into the medieval period show that this was a longstanding position: medieval women were frequently the subject of litigation, albeit with less regularity than men. At Highley, for example, in 1381, the manor court heard evidence that Katherine Hankyns had married outside the manor without permission, while at Earnwood in 1381, Edith Brian was distrained to do fealty for her lands at the next manor court.⁶⁰ There is nothing to suggest that the idea of a woman bringing an action or being sued was considered improper – simply that

⁵⁶ TNA C2/Eliz/B19/52.

⁵⁷ Stretton, *Women Waging Law*, 222.

⁵⁸ Erickson, *Women and Property*, 115.

⁵⁹ Laura Gowing, 'The Freedom of the Streets': Women and Social Space, 1560-1640' in Paul Griffiths and Mark S.R. Jenner (eds.), *Londinopolis: Essays in the Cultural and Social History of Early Modern London* (Manchester, 2000), 133.

⁶⁰ TNA SC2/197/106.

there was usually less cause for them to be parties. In this aspect, the evidence of Kinlet and the Blounts does not support Cioni's position in relation to the Elizabethan Chancery that increasing access to the courts heralded an increase in women's rights and status and a wider study of women's involvement in the range of law courts in the period should be considered.⁶¹ The Blounts and their manorial tenants demonstrate that women could and did play a part in litigation, both in the local and central courts.

The position of women and the courts demonstrates the same processes at work in both local and central courts, with interplay between the local and centre. This can be seen in the swainmotes, which were held by Sir John Blount of Kinlet before a jury three times a year in his capacity as steward of the royal forest of Wyre. In 1527 John informed Thomas Cromwell (then serving Cardinal Wolsey) that the brother of a local gentleman, John Oseland, who was keeper of Earnwood Park, and others of his company had confessed to killing forty deer in the forest, as well as also killing one of the keepers.⁶² As John said, 'and so they be indicted at a swainmote holden up St Katherine even last and the said indictment shall come up at the next term'. However, John had heard that Oseland intended to 'go to sue for his pardon to the king's highness and if he should lightly obtain it he should be unto the detriment of the king's grace'. John therefore requested that Cromwell ask the king not to seal the pardon until he had been informed of his version of events, particularly since (as he claimed) John Oseland had also previously been indicted (but pleaded not guilty) for killing deer. John wrote his letter to Cromwell the day after the swainmote was held, indicating the importance of the

⁶¹ Cioni, 'Elizabethan Chancery', 159. Cioni and Stretton's conclusions in relation to increasing access by women to the courts in the period has been criticised by other historians, such as Erickson, *Women and Property*, 263 and Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570-1640* (Cambridge, 1987), 143. Laura Gowing notes an increase in female litigants in London's Consistory Courts in the period but does not associate this with any increase in women's rights or status (Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 33).

⁶² TNA SP1/235, f.228.

issue and the need to solicit centralised authority when the matter was moved outside the local area. It also demonstrates that both Oseland and John were aware that the authority of the king outstripped any judgment that the local swainmotes could give, something that does limit their authority to some extent. John Blount was clearly aware of the possibility of using central courts to influence local matters. In 1515-1518 he issued a Chancery Bill against a yeoman named Roger Halborowe of Wolverley, who had been brought before the swainmote in the forest of Wyre accused of hunting without licence and killing a stag.⁶³ John complained that Halborowe had continued to hunt illegally in defiance of orders made by him in the swainmote and other orders from the Court of the Exchequer. Arguably, the swainmote's judgment was not necessarily as authoritative as that of a central or higher court, however, as the matters above show, John was not seeking a new judgment from the centralised authorities, merely requesting support for the judgment already handed down by a local court. As such, although the central courts and government could be, and were seen to be, useful in enforcing judgments, their involvement was not necessarily required in relation to making the judgment in the first place. The evidence suggests that the local court system was flourishing in the sixteenth century, while participation on a local level was very wide. As will be shown later, even where disputes were brought in other – national – courts, it was often the manor court that was required to enforce the judgment.

Equity and the Courts of Chancery

Sixteenth century litigants had a wide range of courts in which they could bring their actions. In theory, the common law courts (of the King's Bench and Common Pleas) should have been the most important to civil litigation. However, they were in decline from the mid-

⁶³ TNA C1/389/2.

fifteenth century until the mid-sixteenth century, with many cases brought in other courts – particularly those of Chancery.⁶⁴ A number of explanations for this have been advanced although one cause – as identified by Marjorie Blatcher – was the increase in use of trust structures by landowners, something which the common law was unable to recognise.⁶⁵ Effectively, the rigidity of the common law, which was based on precedent and which viewed a transfer to trustees as an alienation of the legal title (without any analysis of the beneficial position) had not kept pace with the way in which landowners were structuring their property in the period, while the Chancery courts – which were courts of equity and thus recognised beneficial interests – were also newer and less hampered by case law and precedent, allowing the judges to give more creative and nuanced judgments. This is not entirely convincing, since trusts made up only a small minority of the Chancery court's business in the sixteenth century with civil disputes – previously the business of the common law – making up the bulk of cases.⁶⁶ Instead, the attraction may have been that, while in theory the Chancery courts were central institutions in the same way as the Court of the King's Bench which sat at Westminster, in practice the Lord Chancellor, who was the Chancery's only judge, delegated the management of cases, which followed a largely written process.⁶⁷ Cases were therefore administered in the localities by local officers, with participants rarely expected to travel. Blounts clearly favoured the Chancery courts. Papers for only two Common law cases involving the Blounts of Kinlet survive from the period, as opposed to numerous Chancery examples.

⁶⁴ Marjorie Blatcher, *The Court of the King's Bench 1450-1550* (London, 1978), 14.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁶⁶ Jones, 'Due process', 149.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

The importance of Chancery in major property disputes can be seen in two Chancery suits in which the Blounts were involved in the early years of the sixteenth century, both of which involved disputed inheritance and trust arrangements. Towards the end of the fifteenth century John and Katherine Blount of Kinlet addressed a Bill of Complaint to the Lord Chancellor, alleging that Katherine's grandfather, Humphrey Peshall, had 'graunted and faithfully promised' on the marriage of his son Hugh to Isabel Stanley, that all his manors, lands, tenements and other possessions 'ymmediately after his decesse shuld come growe and dessende to the seid Hugh and to theyres of his body lawfully begotten' (i.e. Katherine), while he also promised that he would not alienate any of his lands during his lifetime, save a jointure of £20 if he were to remarry.⁶⁸ In consideration of this promise, Isabel's father, Sir John Stanley of Pipe, paid Humphrey more than £100, potentially constituting a valid contract recognisable at common law. However, John and Katherine complained that, while Humphrey had transferred his Staffordshire manors to trustees, they had refused to recognise Katherine's right to the property. With their potential common law action, John and Katherine could have issued their claim in the Court of the King's Bench or of Common Pleas. However, they are unlikely to have secured a favourable result, since Humphrey's contractual promise was only to take effect after his death. If they were to obtain some recognition of their claims during Humphrey's lifetime, using the Chancery courts – which could imply his promise as a trust and recognise the later transfer as a transfer to trustees – was the best way to proceed. They were therefore largely constrained by the complexity of the issues at stake to bring their claim in the Chancery courts.

⁶⁸ TNA C1/186/2; TNA C1/186/4.

In their answers the two trustees denied that Humphrey had transferred his lands to them and admitted that they knew Katherine to be her grandfather's heir.⁶⁹ One of them, John Harecourt, additionally alleged an older trust, claiming that Knightley had been settled on him by Humphrey's father to hold for Humphrey's benefit, technically meaning that it was not Humphrey's property at the time of the marriage agreement and so not included in the agreements.⁷⁰ Humphrey claimed that the original agreement was contractually invalid due to lack of consideration as Sir John Stanley of Pipe had failed to perform his covenants. Additionally he contended that, even if the agreement was held to be valid, he was not at that time bound to constitute any trust for Katherine's benefit as 'that was never hys promise so to do during hys lyfe'.⁷¹ He also denied that he had transferred his manors to trustees: he was bound by neither the common law nor equity. The matter ended in Humphrey's favour at that time, as had an earlier almost identical Bill which had been submitted on Katherine's behalf by her mother, Isabel Stanley, and stepfather, John Russhe.⁷² The matter returned to the Chancery again before 1500 when John and Katherine submitted a Bill complaining that Humphrey had married a 26-year-old and placed Knightley and other lands worth £40 a year in trust for the duration of his and his new wife's lives, with the remainder to then pass to his heirs.⁷³

That Katherine and John were right to be suspicious of Humphrey is clear from a document dated 8 April 1498, in which he declared that he had settled the manors of Knightley and Little Onne on his wife for her life, with the remainder of this and his other property to any

⁶⁹ TNA C4/8/25; TNA C1/186/3.

⁷⁰ TNA C1/186/3.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² TNA C1/222/94; TNA C1/222/97; TNA C1/222/98.

⁷³ TNA C1/186/5.

male issue or, in default of this, his daughters by his first wife.⁷⁴ Humphrey was initially successful in disinheriting Katherine, with his Staffordshire *Inquisition Post Mortem* recognising his infant son, Richard, while his widow's interest in the lands was confirmed and Richard's wardship granted to her brother.⁷⁵ The Blounts responded by issuing further Chancery proceedings, but they were largely unsuccessful.⁷⁶ The agreements were structured by Humphrey in such a complex manner that neither the common law nor equity were equipped to deal with them on the Blounts' behalf. They therefore used their social connections to secure a resolution. John's father, Sir Thomas Blount of Kinlet, paid the king £300 on 19 March 1504 to have custody of Humphrey's lands during Richard's minority, effectively overreaching the judgment of the court.⁷⁷ While this did not immediately overturn Humphrey's trust arrangements, it did place the Blounts in control of the inheritance as trustees.⁷⁸ The ability to harness royal favour in this way, which stemmed from Thomas's prominence in local politics and, perhaps, also the patronage of more prominent relatives, such as his father-in-law, Sir Richard Croft, gave the Blounts the advantage and allowed them to circumvent the limitations of the Chancery courts. On 12 June 1504 those lands not already entailed on Humphrey's widow were confirmed as belonging absolutely to Katherine by the king. At Richard Peshall's death in August 1520 he held only his father's minor lands in Stafford.⁷⁹ By involving the crown, the Blounts used central authority to overstep the judgment of the courts.

⁷⁴ TNA C142/16/9.

⁷⁵ *Calendar of the Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office, vol 2: Henry VII 1494-1509* (London, 1916) [hereafter *CPR Henry VII 1494-1509*], 314 m.15 (16).

⁷⁶ TNA C1/279/58.

⁷⁷ *CPR Henry VII 1494-1509*, 314 m.15 (16).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 351 m.28 (13).

⁷⁹ TNA E150/1031/3.

Despite the Crown's intervention, local pressures remained of considerable force and importance. The matter was far from over with Richard Peshall's death, with further Chancery suits brought by John and Katherine against Humphrey's trustees and Katherine's aunts, who claimed to be Humphrey's heirs, while the aunts' husbands brought their own suits.⁸⁰ The Blounts were also forced to wait until Humphrey's widow's death to obtain Knightley and Little Onne, in spite of royal favour.⁸¹ The facts of this long and complex series of cases makes it clear that the centralised nature of the Chancery court should be questioned: while judgment (where the various suits went so far as reaching judgment) was given by the Lord Chancellor in Westminster, the business of the court was carried out primarily in the localities, while local pressures and interests also meant that even the involvement of the Crown could not entirely supersede the judgment of the court or how the structures put in place over the ownership of Humphrey's estates were viewed in the local area.

Sir Thomas Blount of Kinlet (d.1524) also attempted to disinherit John and Katherine, with the matter again litigated through Chancery due to the fact that it concerned two competing trusts over Kinlet. John's Bill of Complaint set out the terms of his marriage settlement, claiming that, in an agreement made with Katherine's mother and grandfather, Thomas had 'ffeythfully promised that for maryage to be had between the seid John and Kateryn he would doo and cause that his seid manor of Kynlett and other the premysses with all other his lands and tenements should after his dethe pertaine descend and come to the seid John Blount and Kateryn and the heyres of theyr too body lawfully begotten'.⁸² Thomas then transferred the

⁸⁰ TNA C1/385/1; TNA C1/385/2; TNA C142/16/9; TNA C1/279/58.

⁸¹ Derbyshire Record Office D2375M/1/3; *L&P* 1, 969 (47).

⁸² TNA C1/385/10.

title to Kinlet to his cousin, William Blount, Lord Mountjoy, and others as trustees to hold beneficially for Thomas ‘for terme of his liff and after his decease to the use of the seid John Blount and Kateryn nowe his wiff and of the heyr of theyr too body lawfully begotten’. Yet, under the terms of his will, Thomas attempted to establish a new trust over Kinlet, settling it on new trustees for the benefit of his second son, Edward, for a term of thirty years.⁸³ The crucial difference in this case and the reason why Chancery was able to be so useful to John and Katherine was that Thomas had actually constituted the marriage settlement over Kinlet. It was not possible for there to be two trusts over the same asset and, therefore, in this case, John’s claim was successful. The outcome of this case shows the Chancery court acting exactly as it was intended to do: ruling on trust law and settling property disputes in a way that the common law was not equipped to deal with. Sometimes, however, claimants in matters that involved a trust attempted the opposite: issuing in the common law courts as a way of ensuring an outcome that did not take the trust into account.

In the Court of Common Pleas case of Purslowe v. Lacon (1581), Dorothy Purslowe, who was the only surviving child of Sir George Blount of Kinlet, and her husband, John Purslowe, attempted to obtain her father’s estate in a common law claim brought against Dorothy’s cousin, Rowland Lacon.⁸⁴ In this case – the only major Common law case in which the family were involved in the period – selective use of the courts can be seen, since it was not in the Purslowes’ interests that the trust, created by Sir George Blount shortly before his death to settle his estate on his nephew, be recognised.⁸⁵ In their Bill, the Purslowes ignored the trust and instead complained that George had transferred the title to his manors by feet of

⁸³ Shropshire Record Office 3320/62/7.

⁸⁴ *The Reports of Sir Edward Coke, Knt., vol II*, eds. J.H. Thomas and J.F. Fraser (London, 1826), Purslow’s Case 90 a. b.-91 a.

⁸⁵ Settlement deed 22 May 1581 (Originally at Kinlet Hall, now lost. Transcribed in Childe-Pemberton, *Elizabeth Blount*, 276-278).

fines to Rowland in the spring of 1581, something which they argued he had no right to do since Dorothy was his heir general. They were not successful in this approach. The court did indeed recognise Dorothy as George's heir by 'right of entail', but since the transfers had been validly executed, all the couple could do was seek a writ of formedon, which would have required the lands to be transferred immediately to Dorothy. However, the court considered that 'though after the fine levied, a right of intail descended to the wife of Purslow, yet after the proclamations past, the right which descended is barred by force of the fine'. Under the common law, Dorothy was indeed George's heir, but he had every ability to alienate his lands by legal conveyance to whomsoever he chose, while the fine itself was sufficient to transfer the title. This set a legal precedent, with the case cited on multiple occasions over the following decades, suggesting that the result was unexpected in the common law and that Dorothy had considered that she had good prospects of success.⁸⁶ Clearly, litigants selected the court they considered likely to be most favourable to their claim. A similar approach can be seen in the King's Bench case of *Wimbish v. Tailbois* (1547), which concerned Dorothy's cousin, Elizabeth Wimbish, who was the daughter of Elizabeth Blount of Kinlet.⁸⁷ In this case, Elizabeth and her husband, Thomas Wimbish, claimed that a trust in favour of her grandmother in relation to the manor of Goltho in Lincolnshire should be ignored in favour of a 1522 Act of Parliament in which the settlor's property was passed to his son and daughter-in-law (Elizabeth Wimbish's parents) as though he was already deceased. In Chancery, the trust should have taken precedence over the Act, since it gave Elizabeth Tailbois (Elizabeth Wimbish's grandmother) a prior life interest. She did, indeed, successfully argue this in the Court of the King's Bench. The matter did not end

⁸⁶ For example, the case was cited as authority in the reign of Charles II in *Took v. Glascock* Pasch. 21 Car. II. Regis (*The Reports of the Most Learned Sir Edmund Saunders, Knt. Late Lord Chief Justice of the King's Bench, of Several Pleadings and Cases in the Court of King's Bench, vol I*, ed. J. Williams (London, 1845), 258).

⁸⁷ Edmund Plowden, *The Commentaries, or Reports of Edmund Plowden* (Dublin, 1792).

there, however, with the couple later bringing a second case in the court complaining that Elizabeth Tailbois and other relatives had forced them out of Goltho once more.⁸⁸ This time they were more successful, with the court allowing a writ of assize to be directed to the Sheriff of Lincolnshire to obtain the return of the manor for the Wimbishs.

As well as making an informed and selective choice of courts, complainants also hedged their bets – taking out actions in multiple courts in the hope of securing the outcome they required. In the late 1580s and 1590s Gregory Ballard, a gentleman of the queen’s chapel, and his wife Margery issued two Bills of Complaint against John and Dorothy Purslowe.⁸⁹ They complained that Sir George Blount of Kinlet (Dorothy’s father) had owned certain property in Bewdley which he had sold to Margery Ballard and her father in 1558-9 and that, following this, Margery’s father had let the property to Dorothy, her husband and a number of other named individuals for an annual rent. Unfortunately, according to the Bill, all the documents relating to the conveyance from George and the counterparts to the leases had fallen into Dorothy’s hands and she ceased to pay the rent. The claimants confirmed that it was this circumstance that had led to them issuing in Chancery since, without documentary evidence and even any proof of what rent they should demand, they were ‘without all remedye’ under the ‘ordinary course of the common law’. In her reply, Dorothy denied that her father had sold the land, as well as complaining that the complainants had originally raised a suit in the common law Court of Common Pleas at Westminster. By using two different courts, the complainants were attempting to cover all arguments and secure the most favourable judgment. There are other examples of parallel cases in different courts being pursued, such as in the case of Thomas Bolte v. Sir George Blount.

⁸⁸ Wimbish v. Willoughby (Plowden, *Commentaries*).

⁸⁹ TNA C2/Eliz/B17/51; TNA C2/Eliz/B19/52.

One advantage of using the Chancery courts, in addition to their flexibility, was the ability to take action away from the manor courts, which might favour the lord of the manor. In the 1560s, Thomas Bolte, parson of Checkley in Staffordshire, exhibited a Bill of Complaint against Sir George Blount of Kinlet, who was one of the church patrons. Bolte claimed that he had been appointed as parson one year before by the other church patron.⁹⁰ However, Bolte argued that George – motivated by a desire to take the glebe lands and their profits into his own hands – had entered the rectory, locked the church and barred the parson from entering. Bolte claimed to have turned first to the Justices of the Peace but that, in spite of their order, ‘the said servants by command of the said Sir George do continue in the said rectory, and receive all the tithes thereof and will not permit your said orator to intermeddle therewith, and will not make unto him any due recompense’. Bolte then turned to the Chancery Courts as a means of ensuring that the law of conscience and equity were applied – with his argument contending that, since he had by then been in office for a year, it would be unconscionable for him to be removed. He also had a second line of argument thanks to the failure of the order made by the Justices of the Peace, considering that he was ‘not able to prosecute the common law against the said Sir George for the recovery of the premises’.

Interestingly, Bolte also brought a parallel Star Chamber claim against George and his servants.⁹¹ Although Bolte’s Bill does not survive, the defendants’ answer does, in which ‘Sir George Blount says the bill is replenished with untrue matters, to put him to wrongful vexation’. George argued that he had understood Bolte to be outlawed and that he had

⁹⁰ W.K. Boyd (ed.), ‘Chancery Proceedings Temp. Eliz AD 1560 to AD 1570’, *Collections for a History of Staffordshire*, New Series, IX (1906), 59.

⁹¹ ‘Star Chamber proceedings Henry VIII and Edward VI’, *Collections for a History of Staffordshire*, 3rd Series, 3 (1912), 76.

therefore taken steps to put him out of the parsonage, since ‘he ought of right to have the goods of outlaws’. George alleged that he had entered peaceably and had kept the queen’s bailiff informed of his doings, as well as producing an inventory of Bolte’s goods. In his answer George refused to be drawn on whether or not Bolte was legitimately parson of the parish, instead relying on the grounds of his outlawry. In his replication, Bolte however confirmed that his Bill was true and that ‘he is not a man of evil behaviour and so known to be to the Justices of the assizes and of the peace in county Stafford, and is true and lawful parson of the said parsonage of Checkley’, since he had been appointed by Sir John Savage who had inherited the right to present jointly with George, with the manorial custom being that ‘they used to present thereto by turn, the next presentation whereof belongs to Sir John Savage. Without that that the said parsonage is in the manor of Overtene’. Bolte’s use of the centralised courts is understandable in light of Sir George Blount’s very significant local prominence both as a regular Justice of the Peace for Staffordshire and as a major landholder.⁹² George was also Sheriff of Staffordshire in 1552 and 1572.⁹³ By issuing in multiple courts, Bolte hedged his bets. His claims show a complainant using the centralised courts in a sophisticated way – helped by the willingness of these courts to admit claims that would ordinarily be dealt with in other courts. Frustratingly, as is so often the case with court records of the period, there is no record of how the dispute ended.

The wide range of matters that the Chancery courts were prepared to accept can be seen in relation to the Blounts. John Blount of Kinlet’s daughter, Agnes Lacon, was the defendant in a Chancery case from between 1544 and 1547 brought by a merchant named George Wode,

⁹² Ibid., 285.

⁹³ Ibid., 323-4.

concerning a piece of broad cloth for which she had failed to pay.⁹⁴ Around the same time she brought a counter suit against Wode concerning money that she had paid to him to secure the wardship of her eldest son from the king.⁹⁵ She also brought her own claim in Chancery against William Jennings, who had served as both her mother and husband's executor, to claim the return of cups, glasses and other possessions that had belonged to her husband.⁹⁶ These matters, which involved contract law, could have been dealt with by the common law and the fact that these cases were issued instead in the Chancery highlights the considerable prominence of this court in the period and the decline in popularity of the common law courts. It also shows the willingness of the Chancery courts to hear matters which arguably had little business in being directed towards them. Since Chancery can have afforded little legal advantage over the common law in these contractual matters, it seems likely that a factor in its popularity was the localised nature of the process it offered. With the claimants, defendants and witnesses interviewed in the localities and, often on the same day and in the same place, the development of the Chancery courts might just as well be construed as an additional layer to local political activities than as a means by the government to expand the reach of the centre. Very few of the cases involving the Blounts reached formal judgment, with most matters settling out of court. Arguably, the point of these cases was not to obtain judgment, but to instead use the threat of the possibility of this judgment to ensure negotiation and agreement on a more localised stage, something which accords with the prevailing historiography.⁹⁷ The way in which the Blounts made use of the Chancery courts was remarkably stable throughout the sixteenth century, indicating that it remained their preferred arena even as the body of case law that was built up began to make the court's

⁹⁴ TNA C1/168/55.

⁹⁵ TNA C1/1141/27-31.

⁹⁶ TNA C1/1141/4.

⁹⁷ Sharpe, 'The People and the Law', 253; Cust and Hopper, Duelling, 169; Outhwaite, *English Ecclesiastical Courts*, 2; Hindle, 'Public peace', 213; Brooks, *Lawyers, Litigation and English Society*, 12.

decisions more rigid. This, again, implies that issuing in Chancery was advantageous not merely for the legal determination it offered: its process, both nominally centralised and, yet, grounded in the localities was highly attractive to sixteenth-century litigants.

The Court of Star Chamber

Like Chancery, the Court of Star Chamber was a relatively new arena for litigation by the late fifteenth century, having developed from the fourteenth century onwards as part of the judicial work of the king's council.⁹⁸ During Henry VII's reign, the court remained part of the work of the king's council. By then, most cases were civil and brought by private parties with some element of public disorder usually alleged against the defendant: something that was commonly fictitious and designed to bring them within the court's jurisdiction.⁹⁹ Instead, most suits concerned land.¹⁰⁰ The main advantage of using Star Chamber was the additional authority provided by the court's association with the king's council, while it also provided real judicial determination when required.¹⁰¹ Star Chamber matters could be costly, with the complainant, defendant and (sometimes) witnesses required to travel to London for the matter to be heard, in contrast with other judicial options.¹⁰² Most disputes were local in nature, while the threat of forcing an individual to travel to London potentially a powerful tool in ensuring that a matter was settled quickly to a claimant's satisfaction. Star Chamber proceedings, too, sometimes relied on local men to prosecute the cases, demonstrating the continuing importance of the localities to justice in even the most centralised of courts. In 1518, for example, John Blount of Kinlet was required as a Justice of the Peace for

⁹⁸ John Guy, *The Cardinal's Court* (Hassocks, 1977), 6.

⁹⁹ Guy, *Cardinal's Court*, 16; Wood, 'Some Banglyng', 13.

¹⁰⁰ Guy, *Cardinal's Court*, 52.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 85.

Staffordshire to carry out the interrogatories in the case of George and Mary Gresley against Sir William Gresley.¹⁰³

A decision to take action in Star Chamber may often have been made in response to fears that justice could not be obtained through local channels.¹⁰⁴ Even very prominent individuals were sometimes concerned that they could not obtain a fair hearing from the Justices of the Peace or in the manorial courts. Sir George Blount, for example, brought a case before 1553 against one Thomas Chetwyn, concerning the manor of Hopton in Staffordshire, which George had inherited from his mother in 1541.¹⁰⁵ George's manorial tenants had asked permission to plough common land, something which he granted and accordingly sent his servants to do. However, what had once been a manorial matter assumed wider importance when (as George alleged) 'Thomas Chetwyn, gent., servant to Lord Ferrars, and others who bear no good will to your orator, had upon untrue surmises made to the said Lord and to Humphrey Wellys, Justices of the Peace in the said county, which Humphrey married the sister of the said Chetwyn, obtained warrant of good aberyng against the said Humphrey Foxe, etc. [George's servants], and others that were at the ploughing of the said ground'. He then claimed that Chetwyn's men attacked his men and impounded cattle and oxen belonging to George's manorial tenants. He also arrested George's servants and brought them before Lord Ferrers who required sureties before they could be released. The clear implication with this case – for which no other documents survive – is that Thomas Chetwyn's local connections were enough to trump even George's, making it necessary for him to obtain

¹⁰³ 'Proceedings of the court of Star Chamber, Temp. Henry VIII and Edward VI', ed. W.K. Boyd, *Collections for a History of Staffordshire*, 3rd Series, 1 (1910), 14.

¹⁰⁴ For example, at Kinlet, Gnossall (convened by Sir George Blount) and Bewdley (convened by Gilbert Blount in the 1560s and 1570s). Shropshire Archives 2089/9/5/56.

¹⁰⁵ Boyd, 'Proceedings of the court of Star Chamber, Temp. Henry VIII and Edward VI', 77-8; 'Star Chamber proceedings Henry VIII and Edward VI', 169-170.

more impartial judgment in London. The possibility of bias was also recognised in relation to other local offices. A 1543 dispute over land in Sillingford between Thomas Blount of Sodington and Thomas Meysey of Shakenhurst may have been complicated by the fact that Meysey's brother Leonard, who alleged that he was imprisoned on Blount's orders, was also then serving as constable of the town, something which was noted in the evidence provided by Blount's supporters.¹⁰⁶ There were sound reasons for the case to be heard outside the local area by Star Chamber.

Manorial tenants also issued claims against Sir George Blount of Kinlet in Star Chamber. Towards the end of Henry VIII's reign, the brothers William and Thomas Southall complained that they had been evicted from two farms that they held as copyhold tenants. The brothers were successful in their initial claim, with the court ruling that 'yt did appere upon the examination of the seid matter that the father of the seid complainant did pay certain summes of money to Sir Thomas Blount grandfather of the seid Sir George in the name of a fine'.¹⁰⁷ However, since they had been unable to produce a copy of the document proving this fine, it was 'further ordered and devised by the consent and agreement of the seid Sir George that the said Sir George at his court next to be holden and kept at his seid manor of Kynlet shulde cause a newe formalitie of the said lands and tenements to be made unto your said subjects to have and to holde the same to them during their lives'. The transfer of a tenancy from a deceased tenant to his heirs following the payment of a fine was very common business for a manor court to undertake but, in this case, the Southalls were able to use Star Chamber to overstep the manor court and their lord, before receiving an order of the way in which the manor court was to proceed. Nonetheless, although Star Chamber ordered George

¹⁰⁶ TNA STAC10/4/32.

¹⁰⁷ TNA STAC3/4/29.

to proceed in a particular way in his manor court, he failed to comply with this, ordering his men to forcibly enter the land and seize the complainants' cattle. He also claimed that it was the Southalls who had contravened manorial custom, since William Southall had sub-let one of the farms without first seeking a licence from George as his landlord. As George argued in his rejoinder, 'whereof the said William by the custome of the same manor forfeityd his said estate of and in his said parte of the premises'.¹⁰⁸ With the manor court's failure to comply with the judgment, the brothers issued a further claim in Star Chamber on the same grounds.

The Southalls sought to use Star Chamber to obtain judgment against the lord of the manor where they could not hope to receive impartial treatment in the more usual forum of the manor court. Equally, George's refusal to comply with Star Chamber's order of how he should manage his own court and lands demonstrates the fact that it was not necessarily easy to enforce the judgments of centralised courts in the locality.¹⁰⁹ It was also not possible to hear the case entirely separately from the local area, with court officials sent to take evidence from other manorial tenants on behalf of both parties before a judgment was given, with it clearly possible for the lord of the manor to influence proceedings at that stage, although witnesses do seem to have been prepared to give evidence against their lord, including the manor's bailiff, Edward Pygot, who confirmed that it was indeed manorial custom to sublet without permission.¹¹⁰ This suggests that a belief in due process and the rule of law could supersede local loyalties (as also discussed above) and demonstrates a striking faith in the judicial system, particularly since Pygot was far from the only tenant to give evidence against George in this or other matters. In the Star Chamber case of *Stone v. Blount*, for example,

¹⁰⁸ TNA STAC3/3/37.

¹⁰⁹ This was also identified by Wood in relation to a long-running claim involving manorial tenants at Petworth in Sussex (Wood, 'Some Banglyng', 6).

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

which concerned timber in the forest of Wyre, the claimant's witnesses were all either George's manorial tenants or lived on manors under his influence and were examined in the local area.¹¹¹ However, they were still prepared to give detailed evidence against him, with Humphrey Wheeler, for example, informing his examiners that George had been stealing timber from the forest for some years. The examinations of the defence witnesses was undertaken by the same examiners on the same day.¹¹² This was not always the case. In the matter of Southall and Southall v. Blount witness depositions for the claimants were taken in Highley by two local gentlemen, Thomas Meysey (Sir George Blount's first cousin and a grandson of Sir Thomas Blount of Kinlet) and John Corbet on 9 December 1552.¹¹³ Those for the defence were also undertaken in the local area by two other local gentlemen, William Gallagher and William Symonds on 5 January 1553, demonstrating again the importance of local participation in these apparently central court proceedings. Interestingly, the vicar of Kinlet, Alan Cliff, appeared as a witness for both sides, but others – all of whom were either George's manorial tenants or who lived in Kinlet, Earnwood and Highley, took sides. In the earlier matter of Blount v. Peshall, the defendants and witnesses were interviewed in the church at Burton priory before Richard Salter, clerk, and John Kendbolt, notary, on 9 May.¹¹⁴ The choice of a church for the depositions may have been deliberate. David Palliser has argued in relation to apparently non-religious use of the parish church in the period that it should be taken as further evidence of the centrality of the parish church to a community.¹¹⁵ However, this argument can be taken further since, as Palliser, notes, the parish church had always been used for functions such as tax collection or as schools or courts. As such, it was a highly significant building for witness depositions to be taken in, suggesting that the

¹¹¹ TNA STAC4/10/12.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ TNA STAC3/3/37.

¹¹⁴ TNA C1/186/3.

¹¹⁵ Palliser, 'Parish in perspective', 14.

religious setting was designed to encourage the witnesses and defendants to tell the truth. The parish church's position as a centre 'for communal loyalty and solidarity' could also be significant in encouraging a witness to answer honestly.¹¹⁶

Star Chamber records highlight the considerable rivalry between members of the Blount and Meysey families, who were amongst their closest gentry neighbours and closely related to the Blounts through the marriage of Humphrey Meysey (d.1540) to Anne, daughter of Sir Thomas Blount of Kinlet. The couples' son, Thomas Meysey, issued a claim in Star Chamber before 1553 concerning common land in his manor of Shakenhurst in Worcestershire.¹¹⁷ Around two years earlier, he claimed, Thomas Blount of Sodington had arrived at the common with an armed party of men and 'wrongfully enclosed one parcel of the said common belonging to your said subject containing by estimation three acres of ground'. Thomas ignored all 'friendly' requirements to remove the fencing before, according to the Bill, assembling riotously at Mamble accompanied by his servants and Roger Purslowe, the vicar of Mamble, to attack Thomas Meysey's brother, Leonard. Although no judgment survives, the defendants produced answers to the bill and witnesses were interrogated for both sides, with those on Blount's side insisting that Meysey had no interest in the disputed land.¹¹⁸ Both the Meyseys and the Blounts were very prominent locally and it seems likely that Meysey made his complaint to Star Chamber as a means of obtaining central support for his claims. This was probably also the reason why Sir George Blount of Kinlet issued Star Chamber proceedings against Meysey for illicit hunting in the forest of Wyre, of which George was steward.¹¹⁹ Again, George presumably hoped for the additional authority of a

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 11.

¹¹⁷ TNA STAC2/20/370.

¹¹⁸ For example, deposition of Roger Purslowe (TNA STAC2/24/101) and witness depositions (TNA STAC10/4/32; TNA STAC5/1126/5).

¹¹⁹ TNA STAC5/B5/3.

judgment in a central court as a means of enforcing his will against a social equal in the local area and, thus, influence local politics through the courts. Equally, since Meysey was George's first cousin, he may have been concerned that Meysey could call on much of the same local support and loyalties from which he benefitted.

A further claim was brought in Star Chamber in 1554/8 by a yeoman named William Warton, concerning land at Stottesdon in Shropshire.¹²⁰ He had initially relied on the manor court at Stottesdon, which neighboured Kinlet, when he and his wife Mary took a lease of a messuage of meadow in the manor from Humphrey Cornishe, the lord of the manor there, which was duly noted 'in the corte rolles of the same manor'. Four years before Warton brought his claim in Star Chamber, Cornishe had appointed him to manorial office, requiring him 'to viewe observe and walke his said manor of Stottesdon and all and any part and parcel of the same at all tymes which your said subjecte should think convenient and to make report of the state thereof to the said Humphrey at all times when he should be thereto by him required'. In a Bill of Complaint issued in Star Chamber, Warton alleged that on one of his tours of the manor, on 6 November 1554, he was attacked by Sir George Blount of Kinlet's servants, suffering a head wound. A week after Easter 1555, Warton claimed that he was walking to church when one of George's servants informed him that 'he was commanded by the said Sir George Blount his master to slaye your said subject and in so doing that his said master would beare him safelie'. George's servant shot Warton with a forked arrow, piercing his bowels, before fleeing to Kinlet, where he was 'received and mayneteyned' by George. Around Whitsunday more of George's men attacked a recovered Warton with such force that they all but severed both of his arms, with the left hanging 'only by the skyn and a fewe

¹²⁰ TNA STAC4/5/47.

senewes', while it was later necessary for three bones to be removed from his right arm, rendering it useless. They then carried him to Kinlet where he was kept without medical attention for eighteen hours, only being released because they feared he would die. Earlier, in 1550, George had attempted to buy Warton's black mare at an undervalue, causing his servant to shoot the animal when the offer was refused.

George had also allegedly caused damage to Warton's corn worth more than £150, as well as destroying his crops of wheat and rye and his pasture, while at the same time 'for lak of sufficient impaling' George's sheep had escaped from Kinlet park and eaten the remainder of the crops. In spite of the very considerable violence alleged, Warton was actually only claiming for financial damages to his crops when he issued his claim in Star Chamber, a matter that would usually be dealt with in the manor courts. However, as he set out in his Bill, he 'hath not hitherto pursued any remedy by the order of your highnesses lawes but hath suffered and sustained the same from time to time to his utter undoing partly for that your said subject being a very poor man was not nor yet is able to pursue for his remedy and recompense therein in the said countie of Salop by the order of the common lawe of your highness realm against the said Sir George Blount being of great power and friendship in the said county', while he also feared that in so doing he would cause George 'displeasure and malice' leading to another attempt on his life. George's local power was such that any locally issued claim was unlikely to be successful, again highlighting the use to which the national courts could be employed in relation to local politics. Unfortunately, in common with most legal cases in the period, the outcome of Warton's claim is unknown.

Many disputes could arguably have been settled in the local criminal courts (if their subject matter is taken at face value), with the Quarter Sessions (convened by the Justices of the Peace) and the Assizes available to hear cases in the localities. The Justices were charged with maintaining the peace rather than the punishment of crime and would have been ideally suited to rule on some of the matters contained in the Star Chamber cases discussed above.¹²¹ Magistrates' court records do not survive at all for late fifteenth-century or sixteenth-century Shropshire, with only those for 1400-1414 extant, which show a wide range of offences tried, such as excess prices, clipping coinage, burglary and murder.¹²² The Assize sessions, which involved centrally appointed judges visiting the localities were the more important criminal courts in the period, with Herrup identifying that their political function was as important as their judicial one, since they served as an 'occasion for general exchange between the ruling voices of Westminster and the countryside'.¹²³ Magistrates, who tended to be local gentry, were involved in these sessions and, as Herrup has identified, they provided an important point of contact between the central government and the localities.¹²⁴ While the sessions were important for the localities in the contact they provided with the centre, it was a two-way flow of information and personnel. This movement to and from the centre is a characteristic of the use of courts in the period. The evidence of the Blounts very much supports the position, as set out by Brooks and others, of a court system very much grounded in the localities.

¹²¹ Ibid., 42.

¹²² *The Shropshire Peace Roll 1400-1414*, ed. E.G. Kimball (Shrewsbury, 1959), 35-40.

¹²³ Herrup, *Common Peace*, 51.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 53.

Conclusion

The sixteenth century is characterised as a litigious age with good reason, with a large cross-section of society going to law either as claimant or defendant. The Blounts were no exception and an analysis of their role in legal matters provides considerable data in support of a conception of the use of law courts as centred on the localities. It is clear that the manor court was central to the local community at Kinlet and other Blount family manors, with participation wide and encompassing all levels of society. At the same time, the Blounts and their manorial tenants also made considerable use of the central courts, often choosing the court of issue tactically in order to improve the chances of success of their claim. Rather than looking towards the status of the court, litigants assessed their options and considered which court would best benefit their action, sometimes beginning multiple actions on the same matter in different courts. While a Star Chamber judgment might well be a useful tool for a litigant to obtain, for example, they were still faced with the problem of enforcing it, something that potentially made the apparently humble manor court a greater power in local litigation. As the cases above show, the failure of the lord of the manor to co-operate (such as Humphrey Peshall in the Chancery matter concerning his heirs or George Blount's dispute with his Southall brother tenants) often meant that any court judgment was toothless – an empty piece of paper. Effectively, while the central courts were a useful tool and could assist a litigant in gaining more impartial judgment, they were still faced with the issue of actually enforcing it.

At the same time, the evidence presented above gives little evidence of substantial change in the early modern period, in spite of the development of Star Chamber and the increase in business in the Chancery Courts. While the involvement of women in litigation has been

identified by some historians as evidence of a change in their status, this is not borne out by the evidence of the Blounts. Women's involvement in litigation was still considerably less than that of men, perhaps particularly in a rural setting. Women had always been potential litigants, with the limited property rights of married women and the relative unusualness of female inheritance the major bars to their involvement. There was a general increase in litigation in the sixteenth century, with it therefore unsurprising that women similarly increased in number as litigants.

The Blount family's participation in the law courts points clearly to a thriving system of local governance, with the use of the law courts tied up with social relations in the localities. The family and the people of their local area show a sophisticated use of the law courts, with it evident that most cases, rather than being intended to be taken all the way to judgment, were issued as an attempt to encourage a settlement and thus limit disharmony in the local community.

Chapter 3: Points of Contact: The Blounts in Government

Parliament, which consisted of the House of Lords and House of Commons, with the monarch at the head, was part of the legal system and still viewed as a court in the sixteenth century. It was intended to be a representative assembly and had also been a central feature of government in England since the medieval period.¹ Medieval parliaments were an extension of royal government, although this had begun to change by the sixteenth century with a growing sense of parliament as a body in its own right, albeit that the Tudor parliaments were not necessarily more independent of crown control: the crown was an essential and indispensable part of the parliamentary system.² As Thomas Smith set out in his, admittedly theoretical, treatise *De Republica Anglorum*, in parliament ‘every Englishman is intended to be there present, either in person or by procuration and attorney’.³ Some sixteenth century lawyers, parliamentarians and theorists seem to have been moving towards a concept of parliament as a body distinct from the government itself, with members such as the lawyer, Thomas Norton, considering that it was effectively the sum of its members – with

¹ M. Graves, *The House of Lords in the Parliaments of Edward VI and Mary I* (Cambridge, 1981), 1; Graves, *Tudor Parliaments*; 1. Parliament was commonly understood to be both a court and part of the government, with it still possible for petitioners to seek a legal remedy in parliament by means of a private Bill. Gwilym Dodd, *Justice and Grace: Private Petitioning and the English Parliament in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2007) demonstrates that in the medieval period parliament remained an important part of the court system and a forum in which litigants from all levels of society could consider issuing their claims. Details of members of the Blount family issuing a private petition or being the subject of one are scarce, which is why greater detail on parliament as a court is not provided here. Parliament’s role as part of the government of the country was also of major importance and is discussed here in relation to the Blount family’s involvement.

² Jones, ‘Parliament and the Political Society’, 226; Loach, *Parliament in the Reign of Mary Tudor*, 201; Russell, ‘Parliamentary history in perspective’, 1-27; Russell, ‘Thomas Cromwell’s Doctrine’, 235-246; Todd, ‘Introduction’. In the last quarter of the twentieth century historians came increasingly to reject Whiggish assumptions of the Tudor parliaments as growing in independence and viewing them primarily in light of the events of the seventeenth century (Stone, *Causes*, 91-2, for example, identifies the Elizabethan parliaments developing into ‘a self-conscious political force’ with the development of opposition to the government). Conrad Russell, in particular, identifies the members of parliament in the early seventeenth century as largely loyal servants of the Crown, albeit that their position as members of the local gentry and as representatives of their community could cause competing loyalties; see for example, Conrad Russell, *Parliaments and English Politics 1621-1629* (Oxford, 1979). This fits with Jones, ‘Parliament and the political society’, 226-7, who views parliament in the Elizabethan period as a group of men there ‘to apply their wisdom in the good service of the realm’.

³ Thomas Smith, *De Republica Anglorum*, ed. Leonard Alston (1906), 48-9.

parliament's importance and its doings inseparable from the knowledge and experience brought by the people who sat there.⁴ As such, it is crucial for historians to understand the personnel of parliament – most notably the House of Commons which, with members elected by the local communities, most closely represented the voice of the people of England. The Commons were almost exclusively made up of the knights, esquires and gentlemen from the shires, as well as the wealthier burgesses.⁵ The local origins and loyalties of MPs are therefore an important element in understanding the workings of early modern parliaments.

While the prevailing view amongst historians in the first half of the twentieth century was that the Tudor parliaments played a minor role in government due to the strength and autocratic nature of Crown control, this was superseded by John Neale and others, who recognised parliament's centrality to government although they tended to view the relationship between the Crown and parliament through the prism of political conflict.⁶ Given the conflict between parliament and the Crown in the seventeenth century, it is no surprise that conflict is also looked for in earlier centuries, with John Neale concluding that, by the end of the sixteenth century 'it had become a political force with which the Crown and government had to reckon'.⁷ Lawrence Stone, too, identified increasing evidence of opposition and the loss of Crown control in parliament from the mid-sixteenth century onwards.⁸ Such views were fed by then prevailing historical models, which envisaged a forward-moving process of political and societal change towards modernity.⁹

⁴ Jones, 'Parliament and the political society', 226

⁵ M. Graves, *Elizabethan Parliaments 1559-1601* (London, 1906), 13.

⁶ Roskell, 'Perspectives', 448-75.

⁷ Neale, *Elizabeth I and her Parliaments*, 16; Also see A.F. Pollard, *The Evolution of Parliament* (London, 1964) and Conyers Read, *Lord Burghley and Queen Elizabeth* (London, 1960).

⁸ Stone, *Causes*, 92.

⁹ Stephen Alford, 'Politics and Political History in the Tudor Century', *Historical Journal*, 42 (1999), 536.

Geoffrey Elton, and later Norman Jones, contested this, viewing parliament in terms of its legislative role, with the aim of parliamentary sessions agreement rather than discord.¹⁰ J.S. Roskell, too, countered views of growing conflict and opposition (albeit from a position in which parliament's marginality in relation to the Crown was argued), while Michael Graves has concluded that the emphasis on conflict was a consequence of 'retrospective history'.¹¹ This revisionist position remains influential, with recent studies focussing on parliament's participation rather than its role as a check to action, as well as its ability to provide a channel of communication from the monarch to the counties.¹² This is not to say that there was always harmony in parliament, although evidence for organised opposition in the Tudor parliaments is now recognised as scant.¹³ Indeed, as Graves has identified, there are no occasions where a Tudor parliament refused a grant of money requested by the monarch – one of the primary reasons for which parliament was called and, perhaps, the sole thing which they could have done if they had wanted to demonstrate opposition.¹⁴

Parliament also needs to be understood in terms of its legislative function. To some sixteenth century theorists, such as the lawyer, Christopher St Germain, all law ultimately stemmed from God. From this derived the laws of England which he divided into six grounds,

¹⁰ Cavill, *English Parliaments*, 4; Croft, 'Parliament of England', 217; Elton, *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics II*, 7; Elton, *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics III*, 8; Elton, 'Parliament', 87; Elton, 'Parliament in the Reign of Elizabeth I', 113; Loach, *Parliament in the Reign of Mary Tudor*, 230; Norman Jones, *Faith by Statute: Parliament and the Settlement of Religion, 1559* (London, 1982); Jones, 'Parliament and the Political Society'.

¹¹ Graves, *Tudor Parliaments*, 5; Roskell, 'Perspectives', 448-475.

¹² Cavill, *English Parliaments*, 44; Croft, 'Parliament of England', 217-234; Graves, *House of Lords*, 2.

¹³ Graves, *House of Lords*, 2.

¹⁴ Graves, *Tudor Parliaments*, 7.

including custom and judge-made case law.¹⁵ The legislation contained in parliamentary statutes was the sixth ground. To St Germain, this was a work of collaboration ‘made by our sovereign lord the king and his progenitors, by the lords spiritual and temporal, and the commons in divers parliaments, in such cases where the law of reason, the law of God, custom, maxim, ne other grounds of the law seemed not to be sufficient to punish evil men and to reward good men’. St Germain was not alone in his view of parliament as a law court, with references to the ‘high court of parliament’ abounding in sources from the period.¹⁶ Indeed, the House of Lords remained a court until September 2009 with the creation of the Supreme Court.

There was however change in the period in relation to parliament’s role. Henry VIII’s use of the parliament that opened in 1529 to provide the legislative framework for the constitutional changes of the Reformation helped underline its potential usefulness to the monarchy in relation to its legislative function.¹⁷ By the reign of Mary I it was widely accepted that changes to the state religion could only be made through parliament. Lord Burghley, in the late sixteenth century, considered that parliament was made up of the two Houses, with the queen at the head, ‘and that of these three estates doth consist the whole Body of the Parliament able to make Laws. And that none of the said two Houses without the other can in any wise make laws’.¹⁸ Parliament’s legislative role was strongly acknowledged by the end of the sixteenth century although it was indivisible from the person of the monarch. Indeed,

¹⁵ Christopher St Germain, *The Doctor and Student or Dialogues Between a Doctor of Divinity and a Student in the Laws of England Containing the Grounds of those Laws Together with Questions and Cases Concerning the Equity Thereof*, ed. William Muchall (Cincinnati, 1874), 4, 13, 35.

¹⁶ Dodd, *Justice and Grace*, 1; Elton, *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics II*, 38.

¹⁷ David Dean, ‘Image and Ritual in the Tudor Parliaments’ in Hoak, *Tudor Political Culture*, 245; Elton, *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics III*, 8; Elton, *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics IV*, 37; Graves, *Tudor Parliaments*, 12; Graves, *Elizabethan Parliaments*, 10; Loach, *Parliament in the Reign of Mary Tudor*, 15; Loach, *Parliament Under the Tudors*, 4; Stone, *Causes*, 92.

¹⁸ Simonds D’Ewes (ed.), *The Journal of All the Parliaments during the Reign of Queen Elizabeth* (1682), 350.

Elton could write in 1984 that ‘the Elizabethan Parliament was a working institution engaged in the manufacture of legislation by agreement and in the sorting-out of matters as might cause disagreement. It was dominated by the Queen-in-Council, who guided business in both Houses’.¹⁹ For Elton, the House of Commons was also an important point of contact between the central government and the localities, with the flow of information one that radiated between the centre and the peripheries.²⁰ The status conferred by membership of parliament ensured that, as Elton identified, individuals ‘strove actively, and against other individuals, to get elected’.²¹

Historians’ understanding of the sixteenth-century parliaments as seeking agreement rather than disharmony is illuminating. While studies have tended to focus on the business of parliament itself, there has been less analysis carried out of the electoral process, however, with contested elections recognised to have been rare.²² Mark Kishlansky, for example, who considered parliamentary selection from the Elizabethan period until the late seventeenth century, argued that contested elections were mostly the result of mistakes or accidents in the localities.²³ While the evidence of contested elections is rare, contemporary procedure existed for dealing with election disputes, as Derek Hirst has noted in relation to a dispute over the shire seats for Buckinghamshire in 1603 in which Chancery was used to void the election.²⁴ Kishlansky, too, has identified that Star Chamber was also equipped to resolve conflicts concerning elections.²⁵ It is not disputed here that contested elections were relatively rare, but

¹⁹ Elton, ‘Parliament’, 100.

²⁰ Elton, *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics III*, 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

²² Cavill, *English Parliaments*, 4; Croft, ‘Parliament of England’, 217; Elton, *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics II*, 7; Elton, *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics III*, 8; Elton, ‘Parliament’, 87; Elton, ‘Parliament in the Reign of Elizabeth I’, 113; Loach, *Parliament in the Reign of Mary Tudor*, 230.

²³ Kishlansky, *Parliamentary Selection*, 17.

²⁴ Hirst, ‘Elections and the Privileges’, 852.

²⁵ Kishlansky, *Parliamentary Selection*, 17.

the evidence concerning the Blount family advanced below shows that they may have been more common than usually supposed, while even those elections that appear to have been uncontested were built on the back of extensive politicking in the local area: the struggle to obtain a seat in parliament was one grounded in local politics. Similarly, there is very little evidence for the Blounts' activity in parliament. While it is difficult to draw conclusions from silence in the records, it is suggested that the family's primary interest – based on surviving evidence – was on the fact of election rather than the opportunities offered by service as a member of parliament, something which again suggests that the primary focus of election was to obtain the additional status conferred in the localities by membership of parliament. As such, arguments about the focus of parliament – in relation to opposition or agreement – may be overlooking a rather more fundamental part of the parliamentary process for the vast majority of its members.

Contested Elections

The monarch decided when to call parliament with often several years elapsing between sittings. Summonses were sent to the lords, while writs, addressed to the county Sheriffs, triggered elections both for the knights of the shire (of which there were two per county) and in the parliamentary boroughs.²⁶ Historians usually consider that elections were rarely contested and that modern ideas of politics do not apply in relation to sixteenth-century parliaments.²⁷ However, a clear procedure for contested elections existed, demonstrating that such an event was at least considered possible. No written ballot was taken, with the voters (freeholders with property worth more than 40s) shouting their preferred candidate's name. If the Sheriff could not judge the winner he would separate the parties into groups and estimate

²⁶ Loach, *Parliament Under the Tudors*, 25.

²⁷ Kishlansky, *Parliamentary Selection*, 7.

their numbers. If he still could not tell, he would ask each freeholder for their vote.²⁸ The Blounts were involved in several contested elections, throughout the period under study here. The evidence for these contests is usually limited, often based only on one letter written by a disgruntled party, something which suggests that the number of disputed elections may be greatly under-recorded.

The earliest surviving records for a parliamentary election in which the Blounts participated date from 1536 when the king requested that the same members be returned as had sat in the previous parliament of 1529.²⁹ Choice was therefore constrained, although the fact that elections were still deemed necessary does demonstrate the acknowledged need for participation on a local level in the process.³⁰ There were also circumstances that might lead to a contest, such as in Shropshire, where one of the knights of the shire, Sir John Blount of Kinlet, had died during the preceding parliament. With no evidence of a by-election, there was no certain candidate for the second shire seat in 1536. According to John's widow, Katherine, when the writ arrived in Shropshire, the 'worshipful of the shire with the Justices that sent unto me and willed me to make labour that my son, George Blount, should be one of them, and so I did, my son being at the court'.³¹ Katherine was required to campaign on her son's behalf, with much of the electioneering happening before the actual election. At the same time, the men who had contacted Katherine, lobbied the Sheriff to hold the election away from Shrewsbury (where it was usually held and which was outside the Blount family's sphere of influence) on the pretext of plague. The Sheriff refused this. According to Katherine, the election was contested, with the freeholders of Shrewsbury putting forward a

²⁸ Loach, *Parliament Under the Tudors*, 25.

²⁹ Stanford E. Lehmberg, *The Later Parliaments of Henry VIII 1536-1547* (Cambridge, 1977), 1.

³⁰ Kishlansky, *Parliamentary Selection*, 12.

³¹ Katherine Blount to Thomas Cromwell, 1536, in Mary Anne Everett (ed.), *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies*, 2 (London, 1846), 168.

man named Trentham ‘and so they assembled themselves riotously, that the worshipful of the shire were not content (saying their voice cannot be heard), and much to do to keep the king’s peace. Whereupon they titled their names and went to the Sheriff, willing him to return George Blount, for they would have no other; but in any wise he would not, because the under-Sheriff is a dweller in the said town’. Katherine considered the election to be unfair, since the candidate chosen by the shire gentry was unable to prevail over the Shrewsbury townsmen, something which does indeed support a view that members of parliament were largely chosen before the election by the gentry. However, the very fact that this choice was not adhered to in this case, demonstrates the limits of this approach: it was entirely possible for the choice of the gentry to be contested and overruled in an election. Katherine’s involvement in the election also raised questions about the role of women. Although, in theory, a woman who held freehold land (as Katherine did) was eligible to vote, such women were strongly discouraged by convention.³² There is no evidence that Katherine attempted to vote, although her involvement in the electoral process and the fact that she was considered the person best able to campaign on her son’s behalf does support work on the potential for women to obtain and exercise informal political power in the period, with Katherine’s role in the election only visible because it was contested.³³ There is no suggestion in her letter that her role in electioneering was considered in any way unusual.

In her work on Tudor parliaments, Jennifer Loach noted that the procedure for an election gave the Sheriff considerable power, including not providing sufficient time for the voters to assemble, delaying the vote to reduce support for certain candidates or in returning the wrong

³² Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 9; Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early-Modern England*, 347.

³³ Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early-Modern England*, 345; Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, 8.

names after the election was held.³⁴ There is no doubt that the Sheriff's actions did have the capacity to influence an election: in George Blount's failure to secure election in 1536 his mother considered that the Sheriff's refusal to move the election and the fact that he allowed George's supporters to be shouted down caused his defeat. However, she did not actually accuse the Sheriff – John Corbet of Leigh – of rigging the election. Indeed, as the husband of George's aunt, Margaret Blount, Corbet would seem to have little reason to do so.

Katherine's account of the election instead implies more respect for the electoral process than active intervention by the Sheriff. Her account shows a Sheriff following procedure, as indeed do her attempts to overturn the result of the election. Katherine herself, although she requested that Thomas Cromwell overturn the election result, was forced to obtain witness statements from the men present to confirm that it was believed that George's supporters had been shouted down and that he had, in fact, been the winner of this election – she was unable simply to use her social prestige, wealth or connections to overturn the result: there was a process to be followed. The election shows a Sheriff diligently following electoral procedure, in spite of external pressures, suggesting some faith in the rule of law and parliamentary procedure.

Sir George Blount was involved in another contested election when he was Sheriff of Staffordshire in 1553. During elections for Mary I's first parliament, Lord Stafford sought the election of his son, Henry Stafford, as one of the two knights of the shire, instructing two associates (his steward, Humphrey Welles, and a Justice of the Peace, George Griffith) to lobby on his son's behalf.³⁵ Stafford also wrote to the freeholders in support of his son. The election was held on 7 September 1553 and Thomas Giffard, a courtier and religious

³⁴ Cavill, *English Parliaments*, 125; Loach, *Parliament Under the Tudors*, 25.

³⁵ Anderson, 'Henry, Lord Stafford', 225-242.

conservative who would later sue for pardon at Elizabeth I's coronation, 'was chosen by every man's voice'.³⁶ The second vote was split between Stafford and Edward Littleton, a close associate of Giffard's and fellow religious conservative.³⁷ Lord Stafford claimed that his son was elected 'with as many voices and more' than Giffard had received, but that George Blount, professing himself unable to determine the result of the poll, then required that the supporters of both were examined to see which way they voted. This gave Littleton, whose supporters were more local, the advantage, since Stafford could not afford to maintain his freeholders in the town indefinitely. With Stafford's supporters gone, Littleton was declared to have won by 248 votes and returned for the junior seat, in spite of Lord Stafford's attempts to secure a writ from the queen's council to command George to return his son instead. Littleton was a relative of George's through his mother, which could account for this apparent favouritism. However, since only Stafford's account of the election (at which he was not actually present) survives, it is impossible to determine whether George did actually influence the election. It was, after all, established procedure that the freeholders' votes be counted if the Sheriff could not determine the winner in the initial oral poll. However, the fact that the election was eventually considered to have been won by 248 votes – a sizeable margin – does suggest active interference on George's part, since it is improbable that he would have been unable to identify the winner in the oral poll. As such, Stafford's complaints that many of his son's supporters had been forced to return home does ring true.

Evidently, a Sheriff could influence an election result, albeit within the framework of the electoral process, as George Blount seems to have done. In 1597 the Earl of Essex desired

³⁶ <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1509-1558/member/giffard-thomas-1491-1560>, accessed 11/04/17.

³⁷ <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1509-1558/member/littleton-edward-1489-1558>, accessed 11/04/17.

that his stepfather, Sir Christopher Blount of Kidderminster (the lower status third husband of Essex's mother, Lettice, Countess of Leicester), be returned to one of the Staffordshire shire seats, with his client and relative by marriage, Sir Edward Littleton, to take the second.³⁸ Lord Dudley, however, who was in dispute with Littleton, organised the candidacy of his brother, John Dudley, who was the son-in-law of the Sheriff, Thomas Whorwood, with whom he lived. In a Star Chamber case brought by Littleton, he alleged that Whorwood effectively rigged the election in Dudley's favour by allowing recusants in the Stafford gaol to vote, along with their wives, while other ineligible voters were also brought to the election by Whorwood and Lord Dudley, with Lord Dudley also playing an active part in canvassing support for his brother before the election. Whorwood also apparently organised the Dudley supporters into one group before the election, as well as permitting Lord Dudley to vote. Although Littleton and Blount claimed to have won the oral vote, Whorwood then took another poll to confirm the result, admitting when questioned in Star Chamber that he had interviewed 'divers' of the freeholders, before ending the election to go to dinner, having named Dudley and Blount as the winners. While the Sheriff's conduct here (at least as reported to the Star Chamber) was manipulative and designed to secure Dudley's election, he was still constrained by election procedure as to the extent to which he could act. While Whorwood organised support for Dudley and then presumably deliberately interviewed the freeholders whom he knew supported that candidate, he did still allow the election to run largely to correct procedure. Indeed, the bulk of the electioneering at this particular election took place before the election, something that was almost certainly a feature of most elections – contested or not. Equally, the fact that Lord Dudley introduced only one candidate to directly challenge Littleton, while allowing Blount to stand uncontested, suggests that his

³⁸ <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1558-1603/constituencies/staffordshire>, accessed 11/04/17. This is a different Edward Littleton to the challenger in 1553.

opposition was based on his personal animosity towards Littleton rather than a desire to block Essex's attempts at placing his clients in the shire seats.

A later example of a contested election also suggests that the influence of the Sheriff was subject to procedural constraints. When George Blount's great-nephew, Sir Francis Lacon of Kinlet, sought election to the borough seat for Bridgenorth in a by-election in 1610, the result became confused, with both Lacon and Sir George Hayward, 'pretending to be returned'. When the matter was examined in the Commons on 7 March 1610, it emerged that there were two separate returns. In parliament, it was agreed that Lacon's return was the correct one, even though the Sheriff's return was in favour of Heyward.³⁹ Heyward, too, had enjoyed the support of the Speaker of the House of Commons, who had first nominated him for the seat, but this was evidently not enough to circumvent the correct electoral procedure that had ended in Lacon's election. This is not to say that the Sheriff did not have an important role in the electoral process, but it was constrained by procedure. The examples above suggest an electoral procedure that was both followed and considered effective: as with the use of the courts outlined in the previous chapter, there is clear evidence in a belief in the rule of law and procedure throughout the period under study. Similarly, even in the case of uncontested elections, the activities of individuals to secure their candidacy makes it clear that local politics played a crucial role in deciding the personnel of the House of Commons.

³⁹ *Journal of the House of Commons, volume I, 1547-1629* (London, 1802), 10 March 1610. Also referred to on 14 May 1614.

Although he failed to secure election in 1536, Sir George Blount of Kinlet was elected to a Shropshire shire seat in 1545, 1547 and 1571, while the returns for 1542 are lost.⁴⁰ He regularly took local borough seats in the 1550s, but there were still several parliaments where he did not sit and where no evidence of the election process survives, meaning that the true extent of contested elections cannot be known with any certainty: the fact that four such elections involved the Blount family between 1536 and 1610 suggests that conflict may have been rather more frequent than usually allowed. Equally, however, it is clear that much of the business of electioneering occurred before the election, with only enough candidates as there were seats then presented to the electorate.⁴¹ This argument – that certain locally prominent families felt entitled to the shire seats, which they occupied in rotation depending on the numbers of similarly prominent families in their county – is a compelling one, based on the evidence above: both Katherine Blount and Lord Stafford's complaints in 1536 and 1553 respectively, suggest a sense of entitlement to the shire seats by the leaders of the county, even as the number of borough seats increased in the period.⁴² The evidence above supports Neale's contention that, since all the gentry and a large proportion of their tenants and dependents were eligible to vote, 'a county election furnished an opportunity, quite unique in the life of the community, of testing the social standing of an individual or the relative strength of rival groups and parties'.⁴³ Election to a shire seat was prestigious and it was indicative of social standing, but might require considerable effort, the evidence for which is under-represented in the historical record.

⁴⁰ <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1509-1558/member/blount-sir-george-151213-81>, accessed 06/02/15.

⁴¹ Goronwy Edwards, 'Presidential Address: The Emergence of Majority Rule in English Parliamentary Elections', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 14 (1964), 175-196; Kishlansky, *Parliamentary Selection*, 7; Stanford E. Lehmborg, *The Reformation Parliament 1529-1536* (Cambridge, 1970), 11; Loach, *Parliament Under the Tudors*, 25; John Neale, *The Elizabethan House of Commons* (London, 1950), 69-70.

⁴² Lehmborg, *Reformation Parliament*, 11.

⁴³ Neale, *Elizabethan House of Commons*, 27.

The Importance of Patronage in Relation to Elections

Given the desirability of obtaining a parliamentary seat, it is no surprise that the elections are often looked at in terms of patronage relationships, particularly with regard to the borough seats, which increased in number during the sixteenth century. The Earl of Essex campaigned on behalf of his stepfather, Sir Christopher Blount, in 1593, for example. On 2 January 1593, he wrote to Sir Edward Littleton, Sir Edward Aston and Richard Bagot, informing them that he was unable to write to all those that had an interest in choosing the knight of the shire for Staffordshire, ‘to which place I do exceedingly desire that my very good friend, Sir Christopher Blount, may be elected’.⁴⁴ He continued: ‘I do therefore commend the matter to your friendly solicitations, praying you to move the gentlemen, my good friends and yours in that country, particularly in my name, that they will give their voice with him for my sake; assuring them that, as they shall do it for one whom I hold dear, and whose sufficiency for the place is well known to them, so I will most thankfully desire towards them and yourselves an travail, favour or kindness that shall be shewed them’. He ended with a postscript saying that ‘I persuade myself that my credit is so good with my countrymen, as the using of my name in so small a matter will be but enough to effect it; yet I pray you use me so kindly in it, as to have no repulse’. Essex was clearly looking to place his supporters in parliament since, a week later, he wrote again to Bagot to request that, of the two rival candidates for the remaining shire seat, he should work for Sir Thomas Gerard’s election.⁴⁵ He was, however, unsuccessful in this and the second seat went to Sir Walter Harcourt. Interestingly, at the same election Essex attempted to place candidates in six of the eight Staffordshire borough seats. Only one of his candidates, Edward Reynolds for Stafford, failed to be elected in the

⁴⁴ Folger Shakespeare Library L.a.469, f.1r (Digital Image file name 40147).

⁴⁵ Neale, *Elizabethan House of Commons*, 61.

boroughs, indicating a higher success rate than his efforts for the shire, which will be considered below. Clearly, in this election and in 1597 when Essex also sought the return of many of his candidates, including Sir Christopher Blount (see above), it was important to the Earl to secure seats for his supporters in parliament. Alexandra Gajda has noted that Essex was ‘aggressively alive to the importance of parliamentary patronage as a tool to reward his followers’, using his local ties to the parliamentary boroughs in particular.⁴⁶ Neale also noted Essex’s activities in this regard, although he viewed it solely as a system of reward rather than as an attempt to build a parliamentary party.⁴⁷ With limited surviving information about the proceedings of parliament in the late Elizabethan period, it is difficult to form an opinion, although Gajda has noted some evidence of Essex’s supporters opposing subsidies in 1593, in spite of the fact that such opposition to the Crown could harm their own careers. As such, she considers that Essex sought to use parliament to increase his popular reputation of being concerned for the good of the commonwealth, thereby using parliament in a more sophisticated way than most parliamentary patrons of the period are usually credited with.

The evidence of actual political activity in the Commons in 1593 and 1597 is too limited to form a detailed opinion. There is no evidence of Christopher Blount or any of Essex’s other clients taking any active role, which could perhaps suggest that the use of his followers as political tools was only a secondary consideration to their elections. Other, earlier, examples show that the use of patronage to obtain a seat in parliament was far from an innovation, although this seems more commonly to have concentrated on the borough seats, which were less socially prestigious than those of the shire. Simon Adams has carried out considerable work into Robert Dudley’s clientele, of which some of the Blount family were members. He

⁴⁶ Alexandra Gajda, *The Earl of Essex and Late Elizabethan Political Culture* (Oxford, 2012), 169.

⁴⁷ Neale, *Elizabethan House of Commons*, 230-1.

considers that, for the most part, men of Dudley's clientage were able to obtain election to parliament without patronage, since they were already locally prominent.⁴⁸ He has identified evidence that Robert Dudley placed clients in parliament in the boroughs, but that there is less evidence of his involvement in the shire elections.⁴⁹ In fact, Adams identifies only the election of Thomas Blount of Kidderminster (Christopher Blount's father) as a knight of the shire for Worcestershire as being due to Dudley's influence.⁵⁰ This is possible. Blount, who was a member of a junior branch of the family, was not an obvious contender for election as a knight of the shire and he had indeed served in the household of the Duke of Northumberland and was then one of Robert Dudley's most prominent household officials, serving as his comptroller since 1553.⁵¹ George Bernard sees Thomas Blount as a member of Leicester's affinity.⁵² Nonetheless, in spite of this obvious connection, there is no evidence of Dudley's direct involvement here and Thomas Blount's kinship to the Blounts of Astley in Worcestershire (headed by his uncle), the Blounts of Sodington in Worcestershire (his more distant cousins) and the Blounts of Kinlet (his first cousins) who were on the border with Worcestershire, can also account for his preferment. Indeed, this suggests that the great families of the local area came together in selecting their candidate, although (as set out above) there was likely electioneering carried out before or during the election to ensure the return of the desired candidate. Thomas' uncle, Walter Blount of Astley had himself held a shire seat for Worcestershire in the parliaments of 1553 and 1554. Whatever the circumstances of his election, Thomas Blount sat again for Worcestershire in 1562. He was the last member of the family to serve as knight of the shire for Worcestershire in the sixteenth century. The idea that Robert Dudley did not place him in parliament is supported

⁴⁸ Simon Adams, 'The Dudley Clientele and the House of Commons 1559-1586', *Parliamentary History*, 8(2) (1989), 216-239.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁵¹ George Bernard, 'Introduction', in ed. George Bernard, *The Tudor Nobility* (Manchester, 1992), 244.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 245.

by the fact that Thomas ceased to serve in parliament after 1562. As Adams has noted, by 1563, Dudley was re-established in the West Midlands and, from that date, would have been better able to place clients in parliament in the area.⁵³ Thomas Blount's prominence in Robert Dudley's household likely further increased his local prominence, but this does not mean that there was necessarily direct electioneering on his behalf by Dudley.

There is also little evidence of royal patronage affecting the outcome of shire elections in any of the periods under discussion here. In 1529, most of the knights of the shire were courtiers who were also local landowners.⁵⁴ Stanford Lehmberg observed that 'this is not to say that royal influence was necessarily used to find seats for favourites. It reflects, rather, the structure of Tudor society: most of the greater landowners – those who were likely to be knights of the shire – had spent some time serving the king at court, fighting with him in France, or assisting him in governing the realm'.⁵⁵ The knights of the shire, by definition, were members of the highest ranking local families, something which made a court role likely, but also suggests a very substantial local political role – precluding the need for election campaigning from higher ranking patrons. A distinction must be drawn, however, between elections for the shire and elections for the borough.

While patronage was not a prerequisite to obtaining election to the Commons, it was an important and valuable benefit that patrons could help to secure for their clients, particularly in relation to the boroughs, where noble patrons could exercise real influence away from the

⁵³ Adams, 'Dudley Clientele', 224.

⁵⁴ Lehmberg, *Reformation Parliament*, 13.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

more established gentry networks of the shire elections.⁵⁶ Robert Dudley took a more direct role in borough elections than those of the shire, while his stepson, Essex, was certainly more successful in placing his candidates in the Staffordshire boroughs in 1593 than in the shire seats. This suggests that politics and political affinities may have operated differently in the boroughs, with the boroughs more likely to be subject to non-local pressures. Neale considered the increase in members of the gentry sitting in the traditionally less prestigious borough seats to be an ‘invasion of the boroughs’, with this increase evident in relation to the Blounts.⁵⁷ In 1536, for example, in the contested election for Shropshire, George Blount sought only election to the shire. Later in his career, he was happy to sit for boroughs, representing Bridgnorth in October 1553, Much Wenlock in November 1554 and 1555 and 1558, Bridgnorth again in 1559 and Much Wenlock again in 1563. George was elected as a knight of the shire for Shropshire in 1571, although his final seat was for Much Wenlock in 1572. Evidently, from the regularity with which he served, having a seat in parliament (even a borough one) was of more importance to George than the mere social precedence of the more prestigious (and more contested) county seats. Other members of the family also sat for the boroughs in the period, including George’s brothers Henry (Bridgnorth, 1545) and William (Much Wenlock, 1542). Both brothers died young, curtailing their parliamentary careers. George’s uncle, Robert Blount of Eckington sat for Ludlow in 1547, while more distant family members also held seats in parliament. Notably these men still only sat in local boroughs, suggesting that – while the borough elections were subject to different forces than those for the shire – local influence was still of paramount importance. It was relatively straightforward to insert a candidate into an area where they already wielded influence.

⁵⁶ Graves, *Elizabethan Parliaments*, 33.

⁵⁷ Neale, *Elizabethan House of Commons*, 148.

Elections to Much Wenlock also demonstrate the importance of local connections to election candidates. The Blounts had a considerable presence in the borough thanks to Agnes Blount's (daughter of Sir John Blount of Kinlet) marriage to Richard Lacon of Willey, who was prominent in the town. The couple's sons took parliamentary seats there in 1559 (Rowland) and 1571 and 1597 (William). Agnes's lower status second husband, Thomas Ridley, also sat for Much Wenlock, in 1555. Since Ridley's brother-in-law, George Blount, was also returned for Much Wenlock for that parliament, it seems likely that he owed his election to George. Indeed, the Blounts and Lacons were so dominant in the returns for Much Wenlock that no other explanation than their local prestige need be sought for their elections. Of the Borough's ten surviving returns for between 1529 and 1558, five included at least one member of the Blount or Lacon families. Of the eleven returns that survive for Much Wenlock from Elizabeth's reign, Blounts or Lacons were returned for five although, interestingly, four of these were at the first four parliaments of the reign, with a gap between Sir George Blount sitting in 1572 and his nephew, William Lacon, in 1597. The loss of the seat coincides with increasing penalties against recusancy although, as will be discussed later, the family's Catholicism was not necessarily a bar to public office. There were, in fact, no further parliaments held before George's death in 1581, with the death of such an important local figure probably contributing to a decrease in the status of the family in the local area. The evidence relating to the Blounts suggests that patronage could be an advantage in the boroughs, but was not a necessary element to election where a family was locally prominent, especially with a rise in the desirability of the borough seats that can be seen as the sixteenth century progressed. At the same time, there is almost no evidence concerning the Blounts to support a view that royal or noble patronage was key to securing the more prestigious shire seats. The candidates and elections seem to have been based on local political activities and local prestige.

Parliamentary Activities

Election to parliament was considered to be desirable in the sixteenth century, with the promotion of private bills and the ability to use membership to promote a career in central government major attractions.⁵⁸ Absenteeism in both houses was high, particularly in the Commons.⁵⁹ This perhaps suggests a broader reason behind seeking election rather than a desire to actually carry out parliamentary duties. In the case of Giles, Lord Daubeney, for example, in the late fifteenth century, Dominic Luckett has identified that ‘the real source of Daubeney’s local power was office’.⁶⁰ His prominence at court allowed him to increase his prominence in the local area, something which made him more likely to be elected to parliament. Election to parliament might be better seen as a confirmation of political influence rather than a route to it.

For the Blounts, desire to be represented in parliament is identifiable. Only one private Bill on behalf of the family is known, however, suggesting that the desire to promote legislation was not a major consideration behind the desire to be elected. In this, Walter Blount of Astley was one of the parties, with the Bill read in the Commons four times in March and April 1559. The Bill, which was described as ‘of no great moment’, was intended to secure the return of Hartlebury and Wychemford, which had been granted to Sir Francis Jobson and Walter respectively by the Duke of Northumberland after their confiscation from the Bishopric of Worcester, but had since been confiscated by the crown.⁶¹ Although the Bill

⁵⁸ Elton, *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics III*, 13, 19; Croft, ‘Parliament of England’, 221.

⁵⁹ Elton, ‘Parliament in the Reign of Elizabeth I’, 107.

⁶⁰ Luckett, ‘Crown patronage’, 578-595.

⁶¹ D’Ewes, *Journal*, March 1559.

ultimately did not pass, Walter's great-nephew, Rowland Lacon, evidently did not feel compelled to support his uncle, receiving a licence three days after the Bill's second reading to absent himself from the Commons to attend the Assize courts in Shropshire.⁶²

Once elected, members of the Commons would travel to London. Unfortunately, surviving records for the House of Commons are rare before 1547 and, after that, patchy for much of the sixteenth century, meaning that any conclusions drawn must be tentative.⁶³ None of the Blounts, from surviving documents, appear to have been active parliamentarians. The only evidence of their presence is in relation to committees, indicating at least that they attended some sessions. On 7 April 1571, Sir George Blount of Kinlet was appointed to collect a subsidy. He was evidently present in the Commons that day, since he and his fellow appointees were asked to meet in the Star Chamber on the following Monday at 2pm to discuss the matter further. On 25 May 1571 George was in the Commons when he and a party of other MPs and officials were appointed to go to the Lords to discuss the Bill of the Twelve Shires of Wales.⁶⁴ Christopher Blount, who was then a sergeant at law, was appointed to a committee to deliberate and consult on subsidies in February 1593.⁶⁵ Little other evidence attests to the family's regular presence in the Commons during the sixteenth century.⁶⁶ Both George and his brother-in-law, Thomas Ridley, appear on a list of 106 members of parliament who opposed an unspecified government bill in 1555, but no further details of this survive.⁶⁷ Although he held traditional religious beliefs, George does not appear to have been

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ John Neale, 'The Commons' Journal of the Tudor Period', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 3 (1920), 136-170.

⁶⁴ *Journal of the House of Commons, volume I, 1547-1629*.

⁶⁵ D'Ewes, *Journal*, February 1593.

⁶⁶ *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I, 3 vols*, ed. T.E. Hartley (London, 1995) records no Blount involvement.

⁶⁷ Surrey History Centre MS LM/1331/2.

identified with conservative policy during the reign, with his association with the Duke of Northumberland (for whose widow George would later serve as executor) potentially ensuring that he was not returned in the first Marian parliament, although he sat in all subsequent parliaments of the reign. While several occasions of opposition to government policy in the Commons are known from the reign, historians have not been able to identify evidence of continued and organised opposition, while the measures of most importance to the queen, such as the reconciliation with Rome, passed without significant difficulty.⁶⁸ There is no obvious political or religious affiliation between the men listed as opposing a bill in 1555.⁶⁹ In the context of his long parliamentary career, one recorded instance of opposition in a parliament concerned mostly with religious matters of which George largely approved, does not suggest that he played – or intended to play – any great political role in parliament. From the admittedly limited surviving evidence, it seems most probable that election was the focus of Sir George Blount's ambition.

Even when candidates secured their seats through patronage, they were not usually required to vote in a particular way by their patrons, with Robert Cecil, for example, having been identified as using election as a reward for his followers rather than as a way of building a party.⁷⁰ This can be seen in the Dudley clientele identified by Adams (of which the Blounts would certainly have been members), where it has been identified that, while some of Leicester's followers were active parliamentarians, most of them were not, leaving little

⁶⁸ Loach, *Parliament in the Reign of Mary Tudor*, 172; David Loades, *The Reign of Mary Tudor: Politics, Government and Religion in England 1553-1558* (London, 1991), 214-5.

⁶⁹ Loach, *Parliament in the Reign of Mary Tudor*, 220.

⁷⁰ J.D. Alsop, 'Exchequer Office-Holders in the House of Commons, 1559-1601', *Parliamentary History*, 8 (1989), 242-253; Jones, *Parliament and the Political Society*, 232; R. Tittler, 'Elizabethan Towns and the "Points of Contact": Parliament', *Parliamentary History*, 8 (1989), 279-80; Stephen Hollings, 'Court Patronage, County Governors and the Early Stuart Parliaments', *Parergon*, New Series, 6 (1988), 121-135.

evidence of their presence in parliamentary records.⁷¹ As such, it has been suggested that the existence of a Dudley faction is doubtful.⁷² As John Adamson noted in his study of the 1640s, ‘there is no evidence that peers ever attempted to demand the adherence (or the votes) of MPs who were their servants and stewards’, instead merely viewing them as potential allies due to their already close association with each other.⁷³ Stephen Hollings has also demonstrated with regard to Robert Cecil that ‘being a client of the Earl of Salisbury did not commit you to support the Earl or government in parliament’, while Thomas Norton, speaking against a bill in 1571 argued that ‘the whole body of the realm and good service of the same was rather to be respected than the private regard of place or privilege of any person’, again demonstrates at least the ideal position in the period that members of parliament should act in the best interests of the country, rather than for private preferment.⁷⁴ Adams has argued that Leicester most likely sought the election of his clients because he knew that they had a ‘basic reliability’, both to him and to the Crown, something which fulfilled the brief of the Privy Council in 1571-2 that those returned should be ‘reliable men in their countries’.⁷⁵ The importance of these patronage networks was that the knights of the shire and borough MPs tended to know the local area and, if they supported a government measure would be better placed to ensure its implementation in the counties, an argument that is supported by the evidence of the Blounts’ parliamentary activity as set out above.⁷⁶ As such, the local political context of parliamentary involvement is a key area for further analysis in relation to the sixteenth-century history of parliament.

⁷¹ Simon Adams, ‘Politics’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 7 (1997), 263.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 263.

⁷³ John Adamson, *The Civil Wars* (Basingstoke, 2008).

⁷⁴ Jones, ‘Parliament and the Political Society’, 226-7.

⁷⁵ Adams, ‘Politics’, 263.

⁷⁶ Hollings, ‘Court Patronage’, 122, 127.

Conclusion

The Blount family show a steady presence in parliament throughout the sixteenth century, both in shire and borough seats. The experiences of the Blounts suggest that contested elections may have been more common than usually allowed. In all cases where details of an election involving a Blount survive, there was a contest. Of course, this data is highly likely to be skewed since accounts of disputes survive more readily than that of uncontroversial elections. Indeed, the many examples of Blounts being returned to parliament were probably the result of uncontested elections. Nonetheless, such foregone conclusions had usually been anything but when the monarch's writ first arrived in the counties – much politicking and electioneering went on before the candidates were presented, with only hints of the extent of these activities now surviving. Based on this, it seems possible that elections were rather more contested than supposed. A wider study is required to confirm this.

In relation to the Blounts, there is very little evidence of direct patronage in securing seats in parliament. Although Dudley influence has been suggested for Thomas Blount of Kidderminster's shire seat for Worcestershire in 1559 and Essex influence is known for Sir Christopher Blount for the shire seat for Staffordshire in 1593 and 1597, in the main the family were easily locally prominent enough to secure election to the shire seats on occasion and the boroughs with regularity. The Blounts suggest that election to parliament was strongly connected to local influence and status and less reliant on patronage. It was the leaders of the boroughs and counties who went to London to take up their seats, rather than the less locally established lordly clients.

Parliament was a major point of contact between the Tudor state and the localities. While it is now widely accepted that the aim of a parliamentary session was agreement, the example of the Blounts suggests that membership of the House of Commons was often built on earlier disputation and negotiation in the localities. While the House of Commons was an essential part of the legislative process in England (particularly after 1529), to its members election may have been their ultimate aim, with membership of parliament an important indicator of local political status in the period.

Chapter 4: Retinues, Patrons and Clients in Peace and War

One means by which the Tudor monarchs increased their control over the localities was by more directly patronising the local gentry through crown office, with these new patterns of patronage existing alongside the affinities of the nobility who, as George Bernard has identified, show little evidence of a decline in power or influence in the period.¹ Patronage relationships were hugely important in the sixteenth century, with clients offering service to their patron in return for preferment and career advancement. These social relationships have been characterised as reciprocal and often involved assistance provided within kinship groups.² This chapter will examine the experience of the Blounts within patronage networks, and argue that their status and identity were fundamentally shaped by their roles as patrons and clients, in particular within the context of military service.

There was a constriction in the inner circle at court under Henry VII and VIII, with the creation of the privy chamber leading to a limitation in access to the monarch (albeit in different ways under the first two Tudor kings).³ However, the king remained central to all patronage networks, with a trickle-down effect from the monarch all the way out to the localities observable.⁴ Historians recognise that the route to power became more

¹ Gunn, *Charles Brandon*, 226; Guy, *Tudor England*, 63-4; Guy, 'The rhetoric of counsel', 293-6; James, *Society, Politics and Culture*; Maczak, 'From aristocratic household', 319; Peck, *Court Patronage*, 2; George Bernard, *The Power of the Early Tudor Nobility: A Study of the Fourth and Fifth Earls of Shrewsbury* (Brighton, 1985), 1; Bernard, 'Introduction', 3; T.B. Pugh, 'Henry VII and the English Nobility' in Bernard, *Tudor Nobility*, 57; Peck, *Court Patronage*, 3.

² Slater, *The Weightiest Business*, 27.

³ Miller, *Henry VIII and the English Nobility*, 89; Starkey, 'Court, Council, and Nobility', 175; Starkey, *Reign of Henry VIII*, 84.

⁴ Adams, *Leicester and the Court*, 28; Loades, *The Tudor Court*, 85; Maczak, 'From aristocratic household', 316; Kenneth Bruce McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (Oxford, 1973), 120; Miller, *Henry VIII and the English Nobility*, 78; Starkey, 'Court, Council, and Nobility', 175-204; Starkey, *Reign of Henry VIII*, 52, 57; Given-Wilson, *The Royal Household*, 1, 203; Rawcliffe, *Staffords*, 99; Harris, *Women and Politics*, 271.

‘institutionalised’ or tied to office during the early Tudor period, but such appointments still required a degree of favour even if based on merit, influence or heredity.⁵ Dominic Lockett has identified that the Tudor monarchs’ approaches to governing the wider kingdom could be regionally dependent, with Henry VII, for example, relying on a small number of tried and tested allies in areas where he felt most secure, while in less reliable areas, he brought in new men to his service and spread his favour more broadly, effectively widening his patronage network to increase reliance upon his favour in the area.⁶ This highlights the fluidity of the patronage system and the various ways that could be employed by the monarch with respect to patronage networks.

Patronage had always been highly important to the way that England was administered. In the medieval period, the relationships between patrons and clients were usually expressed in large part in military terms. As such, it is impossible to consider patronage networks and relationships without looking at the military relationships which existed and were perceived to exist in the period.⁷ The fifteenth century’s political history was shaped by conflict. This continued into the sixteenth century despite the reduction in civil strife, with participation in the military one way in which people could negotiate social hierarchies at all levels of society and gain preferment.⁸ With few professional soldiers, ways in which troops were raised – from the mechanisms behind their mustering to (later) the religious and social reasons for the recruitment of volunteers – are key issues of any study of the military in the sixteenth century.⁹ The extent to which they shaped society, and in particular the political ties which

⁵ Miller, *Henry VIII and the English Nobility*, 83; Starkey, *Reign of Henry VIII*, 84.

⁶ Lockett, ‘Crown patronage’.

⁷ Gunn, *The English People at War*, 11.

⁸ Gunn, Grummitt and Cools, *War, State, and Society*, 237; John Walter, ‘Introduction: Grids of Power: Order, Hierarchy and Subordination in Early Modern Society’ in John Walter (ed.), *Negotiating Power in Early Modern Society* (Cambridge, 2001), 12; Steven Gunn, *The English People at War*, 11.

⁹ Goring, ‘Military Obligations’, 4; Gunn, Grummitt and Cools, *War, State, and Society*, 22.

bound that society together, is an important element when it comes to understanding the role of the gentry.

At the start of Henry VIII's reign, there were two main ways of raising troops: from the retinues of the nobility and from the county militias.¹⁰ Before the late fifteenth century troops for offensive operations were raised from the retinues of the nobility, with the terms of this service based on land occupation, written indentures or express provision in property leases.¹¹ The county militia was made up of all able-bodied men aged between sixteen and sixty, who were obliged to arm themselves under the terms of the Statute of Winchester of 1285.¹² By convention, they were not supposed to be called upon to serve outside their county but, from 1544, they were drafted to serve abroad.¹³ In 1558 the legal basis for the militia was updated in two Acts of Parliament, although both Acts largely confirmed the previous legislation, with the community divided into ten classes based on property values and income in order to confirm the martial equipment they were obliged to hold.¹⁴ By the late sixteenth century a distinction was made between the trained and untrained men of the militia, with only the trained men regularly mustered.¹⁵

The sixteenth century is usually seen as a turning point in the way that troops were mustered, albeit that a measure of continuity is also recognised. A shift from a feudal to a 'quasi-feudal'

¹⁰ Gunn, *The English People at War*, 2.

¹¹ Dunham, 'Lord Hastings', 9; Gunn, Grummitt and Cools, *War, State, and Society*, 6; Penry Williams, *Tudor Regime* (Oxford, 1979), 2.

¹² Cruickshank, *Elizabeth's Army*, 7; Mark Charles Fissel, *English Warfare, 1511-1642* (London, 2001), 8; Goring, 'Military Obligations', 5; Gunn, Grummitt and Cools, *War, State, and Society*, 21.

¹³ Lindsay Boynton, *The Elizabethan Militia 1558-1638* (London, 1967), 8.

¹⁴ Boynton, *Elizabethan Militia*, 11; Cruickshank, *Elizabeth's Army*, 6 ('An Acte for the Having of Horse, Armour, and Weapons' and 'An Acte for the Taking of Musters').

¹⁵ Boynton, *Elizabethan Militia*, 16; Cruickshank, *Elizabeth's Army*, 8.

system has been identified by Jeremy Goring as developing out of the changes to manorial tenure, by which the leaders of society were summoned to provide retinues of their tenants and servants to serve in an army.¹⁶ The crucial difference here is that such troops were summoned under the authority of the king rather than at the decision of the noblemen and gentry, and that the troops raised were usually not bound to give their lord military service. Goring's work has been hugely influential, with Steven Gunn recently suggesting that the subsequent shift from quasi-feudal to a national basis of raising troops changed the emphasis placed on the two systems for raising troops inherited by Henry VIII (retinues and the militia), with retinues superseded in the 1540s by county forces raised by commissioners.¹⁷

While increasing use of the militia can be observed from the mid-sixteenth century, the continuing existence of retinues (both as military forces and for the social role they fulfilled) is recognised.¹⁸ Indeed, evidence from the Elizabethan period shows that it was impossible for personal ties to be abandoned when the nobility came to raise their troops.¹⁹ More expressly, the requirements for retinue service can still be seen in leases drafted well into the sixteenth century.²⁰ The nobility's military role has been described as 'central to their self-image', with them retaining their importance as military commanders throughout the sixteenth century.²¹ That said, however, current scholarship does recognise a progressive 'demilitarization of the landed elite' from the fifteenth century onwards, with knights less likely to have significant military experience and increasing specialisation, with 'captains',

¹⁶ Dunham, 'Lord Hastings', 9; Goring, 'Military Obligations', 17; Gunn, Grummitt and Cools, *War, State, and Society*, 20.

¹⁷ Gunn, *The English People at War*, 14.

¹⁸ J. P. Cooper, 'Retainers in Tudor England', in J.P. Cooper (ed.), *Land, Men, and Beliefs: Studies in Early-Modern History* (London, 1983), 78-96; Gunn, *The English People at War*, 56.

¹⁹ Boynton, *Elizabethan Militia*, 31; Miller, *Henry VIII and the English Nobility*, 134.

²⁰ Gunn, Grummitt and Cools, *War, State, and Society*, 140; Miller, *Henry VIII and the English Nobility*, 134.

²¹ Gunn, Grummitt and Cools, *War, State, and Society*, 20; Gunn, *The English People at War*, 57.

for example, frequently essentially career soldiers and drawn from the younger sons of the gentry.²² As the sixteenth century progressed, ideas of gentility came increasingly to move away from military service.²³ Arguably, royal affinities were created to rival noblemen's retinues and, thus, increase the monarch's security in the face of these effectively private armies.²⁴ However, Mark Charles Fissel has identified that Henry VIII was inconsistent in his approach to retinues. While he proclaimed against retainers on 3 July 1511, he did make use of the retinues of those noblemen or gentlemen whom he trusted.²⁵ In general, although shifts are evident, it is clear that changes in the raising of troops were never completely clear-cut and many elements of former attitudes and practices continued throughout the early modern period.

Goring's work on the 'quasi-feudal' system contends that it was superseded by a national system of recruitment which can be identified as the militia system. Charles Cruickshank, in a still influential study of the Elizabethan army dating from 1946, considered that the feudal army, raised through the retinue system, had virtually ceased to exist, with the militia's role increased to fill the gap left.²⁶ More recent historians agree, although it is acknowledged that retinues remained to some extent and that there could be overlaps with the militia.²⁷ Boynton, for example, noted the continuing responsibility of an Elizabethan captain towards his men, with local connections and personal ties of considerable importance in the relationship.²⁸ An

²² Gunn, *The English People at War*, 54-55.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Adams, 'Patronage of the Crown', 31; Gunn, Grummitt and Cools, *War, State, and Society*, 21; Goring, 'Military Obligations', 7; Cruickshank, *Elizabeth's Army*, 5; Miller, *Henry VIII and the English Nobility*, 134.

²⁵ Fissell, *English Warfare*, 8.

²⁶ Cruickshank, *Elizabeth's Army*, 7.

²⁷ Boynton, *Elizabethan Militia*, 11; Goring, *Military Obligations*, 7.

²⁸ Boynton, *Elizabethan Militia*, 104.

appreciation of the social context of military provision has produced a more nuanced view of the changes it was undergoing in the long sixteenth century.

Neil Younger has identified an increase in the use of the militia in the Elizabethan period, with this development having important consequences for the way in which the state interacted with the localities, with, as he considers, the lords lieutenants playing a primary role in the raising of troops for overseas conflicts and defence, something that ensured that 'whilst most of the state's military machinery was professional, at the points where the demands of war touched the population, administration was local and amateur'.²⁹ Obviously, not all counties had lord lieutenants and, indeed, Shropshire and Worcestershire, did not, with the sheriffs and justices of the peace instead taking on the role.³⁰ Local politics played a very important role in militia recruitment in the period, which can be seen very clearly in the evidence of the Blounts. Younger, in particular, stresses the impact of war in the local context, considering that it placed a heavy burden on the localities as the most economically burdensome and time-consuming aspect of county affairs.³¹ As such, he considers an understanding of military administration as essential in any studies of how the localities were governed in the Elizabethan period.³² Younger's work was in contrast to much of the then prevailing historiography, which depicted the military efforts in the localities (usually directed by the local gentry), as lacklustre, unenthusiastic and inefficient thus leading to opposition to the central government and the breakdown of some aspects of local administration.³³ Younger's work, however, demonstrates the very considerable interaction

²⁹ Younger, *War and Politics*, 3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

³² *Ibid.*, 5.

³³ Cruickshank, *Elizabeth's Army*; Hassell Smith, *County and Court*; John McGurk, *The Elizabethan Conquest of Ireland: The 1590s Crisis* (Manchester, 1997); Braddick, *State Formation*, chapter 5; Boynton, *Militia*.

between the localities and the centre in mustering troops, with the Elizabethan military's achievements at times impressive.³⁴ As he notes, 'for all the shortcomings of the system, by 1588, the council could plan against the expected invasion attempt in the knowledge that it could call upon reasonably well-established companies of men in every county', demonstrating the importance of the militia and the ability of the local administration to supply this crucial demand of the state.³⁵ Paul Hammer, too, has drawn similar conclusions, identifying that the Elizabethan military was considerably more effective than commonly allowed for historians, something which required a complex interplay between the centre and the localities.³⁶

Blounts served in most sixteenth-century campaigns and were also involved in the mustering of the militia. As regards their experience, it will be shown that while there is a clear increase in the use of the militia (in particular in relation to overseas service), patronage and retinues remained of lasting importance to the family. A patron-client relationship was one of mutual benefit, with patronage not expected to be given freely. As had always been the case, such service was often expressed in military terms although, as the evidence shows, since at least the late medieval period, the military requirements were merely one facet of a relationship that was a key feature of society and is the key to understanding political networks in the period. At the same time, the family's involvement in the militia will be a particular focus, with it clear that the local administration in which they were involved was indeed, as Younger has identified, able to satisfy the demands of the central government to an adequate level.

³⁴ Younger, *War and Politics*, 8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 115

³⁶ Hammer, *Elizabeth's Wars*, 253.

The Blounts and the Retinue System

Retaining in the Medieval Period

During the Hundred Years' War members of the Blount family regularly served in noblemen's retinues, such as Richard Blount of Sodington's service in France with the Black Prince in 1370 and John Blount of Staffordshire's French service with William de Wyndesore in 1380-1.³⁷ Service in military retinues continued into the late fifteenth century. Humphrey Blount of Kinlet (1422-1477), can tentatively be placed in the retinue of John Sutton, Lord Dudley, whose ward he had been.³⁸ Humphrey's position as an esquire of the body to the Lancastrian Henry VI and other minor signs of royal favour may be due to the influence of 'good lordship' on behalf of the peer who retained him.³⁹ It is likely (although not certain) that Humphrey fought as part of Dudley's retinue at the Battle of St Albans on 22 May 1455, on the Lancastrian side and, possibly, also at Blore Heath on 23 September 1459, where Dudley was captured.

By the Battle of Ludford Bridge on 12 October 1459, Humphrey had joined his kinsman, Walter Blount (the future first Lord Mountjoy), who supported the Duke of York, a switch in allegiance for which Humphrey was pardoned that December, alongside his neighbour,

³⁷ 'An account of the military service performed by Staffordshire tenants in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries', ed. George Wrottesley, *Collections for a History of Staffordshire*, 8 (1887), 112; George Wrottesley (ed.), 'Military service performed by Staffordshire tenants during the reign of Richard II, from the original rolls in the Public Record Office', ed. George Wrottesley, *Collections for a History of Staffordshire*, XIV (1893), 230.

³⁸ *CFR* 17, 283.

³⁹ *Calendar of the Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office, Vol 6: Henry VI 1452-61* (London, 1910) [hereafter *CPR* 6], 79, 169; *Calendar of the Fine Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office, vol 18: Henry VI 1445-1452* (London, 1939), 10, 23, 57, 66, 149.

Richard Croft, by Henry VI.⁴⁰ On 7 November 1460, Humphrey was appointed as Sheriff of Shropshire, suggesting that he was still in Crown (Lancastrian) favour.⁴¹ He was, however, an early supporter of the Yorkist Edward IV, being renamed as Sheriff of Shropshire by the new king on 6 March and fighting for him at Towton on 29 March 1461, alongside his cousin, Walter Blount.⁴² Humphrey remained loyal to Edward IV, fighting at Tewkesbury on 4 May 1471, where he knighted by the king. With the exception of his switch to the Yorkist cause in October 1459, Humphrey's allegiances broadly followed the then prevailing side – he was mostly a Lancastrian under the Lancastrian kings and a Yorkist under the Yorkist kings. However, the 1459 switch is interesting, since it marked a break from the retinue of his patron, Lord Dudley. Kinlet was very much within the sphere of influence of the earldom of March, which was held by the Duke of York and his son, Edward IV, with the neighbouring manors of Earnwood and Highley actually held by the Duke, who also leased land to Humphrey. As such, Humphrey's ties both of local loyalty and kinship were to the Yorkist side and it is therefore more remarkable that he was ever a member of a Lancastrian retinue. Pertinently, on his tomb Humphrey was portrayed wearing a Yorkist sun and rose collar as a tangible demonstration of his loyalties: his career demonstrates that local concerns and loyalties were very important to individuals, even when offered patronage by the king.

There is evidence from the wider Blount family that kinship ties were recognised as potentially taking precedence over a man's allegiance to the lord that retained him. On 12 December 1474, Humphrey's cousin, James Blount Esquire entered into an indenture with

⁴⁰ Ian Rowney, 'The Staffordshire Political Community' (Keele University, PhD thesis, 1981), 88; *CPR* 6, 532,539.

⁴¹ *Calendar of the Fine Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office, vol 19: Henry VI 1452-1461* (London, 1939), 289.

⁴² *Calendar of the Fine Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office, vol 20: Edward IV and Henry VI 1461-1471* (London, 1949), 9.

Lord Hastings, in which he promised to be retained by the peer for the term of his life ‘to be his true and faithful servant and to do him true service during his life, and his part take against all earthly creatures, his ligeance to the Lord Mountjoy, his nephew, when he cometh of full age, except’.⁴³ James offered Lord Hastings his military service – in war and peace – promising to ‘at all times be ready to go and ride with the said lord whensoever he shall thereto be required with the land with all such men as he may make at the cost and charge of the said lord’, but such a contractual promise was recognised to be subject to James’s allegiance to the head of his family: Lord Mountjoy. A similar process potentially informed Humphrey Blount’s change of allegiance since a wide range of pressures and factors affected an individual’s loyalties.

While the examples above show military service existing alongside civil office, it was military service, to which Humphrey owed his knighthood, that was central to his self-image: he was depicted on his tomb in Kinlet Church in armour, while he also made reference to military equipment in his will of 1477, bequeathing swords to his two eldest sons.⁴⁴ Humphrey was far from alone in depicting himself as a soldier on his memorial – in spite of the limited time that he actually spent in battle during his lifetime. His thirteenth-century ancestor, Edmund de Cornwall, was depicted armed and in full armour in medieval stained-glass at Kinlet, while Humphrey’s grandson, Sir John Blount (d.1531), was depicted as a recumbent knight on his tomb there. Humphrey’s career was arguably advanced by his increasing military prowess. While he was named on a commission of the peace for Shropshire on 7 May 1466, he was not named as a Justice of the Peace again until the Battle of Tewkesbury, after which he appeared on all commissions, as well as receiving several

⁴³ Dunham, ‘Lord Hastings’, 126-7.

⁴⁴ Bodleian Library MS Blakeway 22, f.25.

grants from the king and being named to a number of other local commissions.⁴⁵ While military service brought him to the attention of the king and increased his local prestige, his services were also required in peace time, with it being impossible to separate military service from other bonds of loyalty.

At nearby Croft Castle in Hereford, Sir Richard Croft was also depicted in armour on his tomb. Croft's daughter, Anne, married Humphrey's eldest son, Thomas Blount of Kinlet in the 1470s. Croft supported the House of York, serving Edward IV as general receiver for the earldom of March in Hereford and Shropshire.⁴⁶ According to Hall's Chronicle, he was responsible for the capture of the Lancastrian Prince of Wales on the field at Tewkesbury.⁴⁷ There is no record that either Croft or his son-in-law, Sir Thomas Blount, fought at Bosworth, although Croft remained prominent under Richard III as treasurer of his household from February 1484.⁴⁸ This has been characterised as 'institutional loyalty' on Croft's part, but there is no indication that he was anything other than a willing servant to Richard.⁴⁹ Henry VII made him the treasurer of his household in 1485, suggesting that Croft's support was easily transferred, perhaps thanks to his long association with the Yorkist royal house into which Henry had married. It may also reflect the unpredictable nature of Yorkist loyalties following Richard III's usurpation. Thomas Blount and his cousin, Edward Blount of Sodington, both served as esquires of the body to Richard III and received financial rewards from him, making it likely that – if they did fight at Bosworth – they fought for the Yorkist

⁴⁵ *Calendar of the Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office, Edward IV 1461-1467* (London, 1897), 570; *Calendar of the Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office, Edward IV Henry VI 1467-1477* (London, 1900), 257, 284, 407, 408, 429, 590, 627.

⁴⁶ H. Southern and N.H. Nicolas, 'Biographical Memoirs of Sir James Croft, Privy Counsellor and Comptroller of the Household of Queen Elizabeth', *The Retrospective Review*, second series, 1 (1827), 472.

⁴⁷ *Hall's Chronicle* (London, 1809), 301.

⁴⁸ BL Harl 433, f.89 contains a grant of £50 from either Edward V or Richard III to Richard Croft. Rosemary Horrox, *Richard III: A Study in Service* (Cambridge, 1989), 210 notes Croft's prominence under Richard III.

⁴⁹ Horrox, *Richard III*, 271.

king.⁵⁰ Both Sir Richard Croft and his son-in-law Thomas Blount fought at the Battle of Stoke in 1487 on Henry VII's side, with Croft created a knight banneret following the battle and Thomas knighted on the field. Sir Richard Croft and Sir Thomas Blount demonstrate that even in a period where loyalties rapidly shifted, it was possible to serve Edward IV, Richard III and Henry VII in quick succession, with Croft's prominent court positions tied in with his military service – in his case, patronage prompted the military action that he provided, something which can also be seen into the late Tudor period. At the same time royal patronage provided him with local and national office.

That service in a late medieval retinue was not always primarily military in character can be seen in the case of Sir Hugh Peshall, who was the father of Katherine Blount (Sir Thomas Blount of Kinlet's daughter-in-law), and his brother-in-law, Sir Humphrey Stanley. Hugh entered into an indenture with Lord Hastings on 28 April 1479, promising to be retained for life, as well as to do services in both peace and war within England, 'at all times when he shall be required with as many persons defensibly arrayed as he can or may make or assemble, at the cost and expense of the foresaid lord'.⁵¹ In return, Hastings offered no financial reward, only a promise of good lordship. The now missing indenture for Humphrey Stanley, which was entered into three years before his brother-in-law's, probably contained similar promises. Lord Hastings' retainers demonstrate the broad way in which retainership was defined in the late fifteenth century, with military service just one of the services that retainers were required to offer.⁵² The significant proportion of Hastings' known retainers who held important local office also suggests that 'good lordship' extended into the local

⁵⁰ BL Harl 433, f.85, f.95.

⁵¹ Quoted from Dunham, 'Lord Hastings', 131.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 10.

area, by increasing the prestige of those he retained in their localities.⁵³ As such, the system must also be viewed in terms of a patron-client relationship, rather than one strictly connected with the need to raise and maintain troops. This can be seen from the fact that when a retainer relationship ended, such as with the execution of Lord Hastings in 1483, the retainers often sought other patrons. Hugh Peshall and Humphrey Stanley moved first to serve the Duke of Buckingham following their lord's execution in 1483.⁵⁴ Hugh's father, Humphrey Peshall, was already in Buckingham's service, being the Duke's 'trusty servant' who rode to York to meet secretly with the future Richard III following Edward IV's death, and assured him of his support.⁵⁵ Hugh Peshall and Humphrey Stanley later joined the retinue of their kinsman, Lord Stanley. Clearly, it was desirable to be in a nobleman's retinue in the period and such relationships can also be characterised as those of patrons and clients, with service required both in peace and war. The relationship was, however, mostly characterised and conceived of in military terms.

Retaining in the Early Tudor Period

Although the Tudor monarchs viewed retaining unfavourably at times, it is acknowledged by historians that retainership can be identified as continuing – to some extent – into the late Elizabethan period, albeit that retinues declined in importance as a means by which troops were raised.⁵⁶ The Blounts support this, with clear evidence that they continued to be retained during the reigns of Henry VII and Henry VIII. Humphrey Blount, the younger brother of Edward Blount of Sodington, for example, served in the household of the third Duke of Buckingham, becoming receiver of his manor of Newport in 1500-1 and later settling at

⁵³ Ibid., 37.

⁵⁴ C.L. Kingsford, *The Stonor Letters and Papers*, vol 2 (London, 1919), 161.

⁵⁵ John Stow, *Annals or General Chronicle of England* (London, 1615), 460.

⁵⁶ Cooper, 'Retainers', 78-96; Gunn, *The English People at War*, 56.

Thornbury in Gloucestershire - Buckingham's seat.⁵⁷ There were many facets to his role in Buckingham's service, including display, to demonstrate the strength of Buckingham's household: Humphrey is recorded as having feasted with the household on four occasions in 1506 and 1507, both at Thornbury and London, when he was also accompanied by his own servants.⁵⁸ There is little to separate his service from the earlier service of Humphrey Stanley and Hugh Peshall to Lord Hastings, for example. As a member of the Duke's household, it would be expected that Humphrey Blount of Thornbury would be called upon to provide military service if required.

The service required by the Earls of Shrewsbury can be observed in the career of Robert Blount of Eckington (fifth son of Sir Thomas Blount of Kinlet). Robert served as a sewer of the chamber at Henry VII's funeral and again as the king's sewer of the chamber for Lincolnshire in January 1526.⁵⁹ He entered the service of the fourth Earl of Shrewsbury before 1536, with the earl, as the major Shropshire peer, an obvious choice of patron geographically. This patronage was advantageous to Robert both financially and by reason of the protection that it offered him. In 1536 Robert Blount sought a lease of the parsonage of Child's Ercall in Shropshire, which was held by Combermere Abbey. The Earl of Shrewsbury himself approached the abbot to request the grant for Robert, with the lease duly made.⁶⁰ Not long afterwards, the abbot received letters from Thomas Cromwell, requesting the grant for his own servant, with the abbot writing apologetically to the minister on 8

⁵⁷ *Visitation of Worcester 1569*, ed. Phillimore, 17. His identity as Edward Blount of Sodington's brother is confirmed by TNA C131/85/27 and TNA C241/273/45. John Blount, Lord Mountjoy, refers to him as 'my cosyn' in his 1485 will (TNA PROB 11/7/374). T.B. Pugh (ed.), *The Marcher Lordships of South Wales 1415-1536* (Cardiff, 1963), 259.

⁵⁸ 'Extracts from the Household Book of Edward Stafford, Duke of Buckingham', *Archaeologia*, 25 (1834), 319, 322, 339.

⁵⁹ *L&P* 1, 20; *L&P* 4, 1939(8).

⁶⁰ *L&P* 11, 247.

August 1536 to confirm that Robert Blount held the parsonage. When Cromwell continued to press the matter, Shrewsbury wrote to him, confirming that he had requested the grant for Robert.⁶¹ Robert Blount obtained and retained the lucrative parsonage thanks to Shrewsbury's patronage. He remained in the fourth Earl's service until his death.

Robert also served the fifth and sixth Earls. By 1544 he was based at Sheffield in Derbyshire, which was within a major concentration of the earl's landholdings.⁶² He was required in February 1545 to escort the Scottish Earl of Cassilis south to London to the king, demonstrating that he was a trusted servant.⁶³ In 1548 he served with the Earl's army in Scotland.⁶⁴ By the late 1570s, Robert had been appointed as bailiff of Shrewsbury's manor of Eckington, where he settled.⁶⁵ Robert continued to act in Shrewsbury's affairs, writing to the Earl to report that he had let the Earl's woods at Kimberworth in Yorkshire, as well as discussing the building of smithies on the site, for example.⁶⁶ The majority of Robert Blount's role in Shrewsbury's service was centred on non-military matters, with Robert an important local administrator and servant, whose position as a retainer helped to bolster his patron's prestige. In this, the role appears similar to the late medieval retainers of Lord Hastings, for example, with Robert serving both in peace and war.

Blount Family Retinues

⁶¹ Ibid., 459.

⁶² *Historical Manuscripts Commission: Report on the Manuscripts of the Most Honourable the Marquess of Bath Preserved at Longleat: vol 4: Seymour Papers 1532-1686* (London, 1968), 69-70.

⁶³ *L&P* 20 part 1, 155.

⁶⁴ *Calendar of State Papers, Scotland*, vol 1, ed. Joseph Bain (London, 1898), 318.

⁶⁵ TNA C 1/1307/23; *Historical Manuscripts Commission: The Manuscripts of the Duke of Rutland, K.G., Preserved at Belvoir Castle*, vol 1 (London, 1888), 108.

⁶⁶ 'A Calendar of the Shrewsbury Papers in the Lambeth Palace Library', ed. E.G.W. Bill, *Derbyshire Archaeological Society Record Series*, 1 (1966), MS.705,f.91v.

Blounts also maintained their own retinues, in spite of the fact that this was contrary to a statute of 1390 which limited retaining only to noblemen.⁶⁷ In 1477, Hugh Peshall (father of Katherine Blount) was brought before the Justices of the Peace at Ludlow, charged with having given liveries to fourteen lower status men of two Shropshire parishes in an attempt to retain them on 10 August 1476.⁶⁸ Such retaining was illegal, but very common. Both Hugh and his brother-in-law, Sir Humphrey Stanley, brought retinues to Bosworth Field in August 1485 when they were two of the four knights who were sent by their kinsman, Lord Stanley, to shore up the vanguard of Henry Tudor's army.⁶⁹ Hugh continued to retain men in peacetime. In 1466, for example, the Countess of Shrewsbury accused him of 'collecting together a great body of malefactors and disturbers of the peace, and breaking into her closes and houses at Whitchurch and Blakemere, and so threatening her servants and tenants that for fear of their lives they were unable to attend to their business or perform their duties to her'.⁷⁰ In 1477, Hugh led seventy-two others in an attack on the house of Sir William Young, in which Young's servants were severely beaten.⁷¹ Later that same year both Hugh and his father, Humphrey Peshall, were accused in Star Chamber of leading twenty men to attack one Richard Berell at Gnossall in Staffordshire, leaving him 'utterly maimed and destroyed'.⁷² Hugh evidently did keep a group of men ready to serve him in peace and war, with these groups looking little different from the sixteenth-century evidence of retaining by the family.

⁶⁷ Dunham, 'Lord Hastings', 12.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 146.

⁶⁹ 'Ballad of Bosworth Field' in *Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript, Ballads and Romances*, vol III, ed. J.W. Hales and F.J. Furnivall (London, 1868).

⁷⁰ Wrottesley, 'Extracts from the Plea Rolls, 34 Henry VI to 14 Edw IV, inclusive', 138.

⁷¹ Murphy, *Henry Fitzroy*, 30.

⁷² Ibid., 30.

Both Sir Thomas Blount of Kinlet and his eldest son, John Blount, served as captains in the retinue of the Earl of Shrewsbury in France in 1513 and were each in charge of 98 men.⁷³ Of his 98 men, Thomas had personally supplied twelve who were part of his personal retinue and whom he mustered in response to letters sent by the king.⁷⁴ There is clear evidence that Sir Thomas Blount employed retainers both in times of peace and war. In 1522, a military survey was conducted in order to make assessments for the forced loans to finance war in France. Survivals are patchy, although those for part of Worcestershire, where Thomas was a very minor landowner, do exist.⁷⁵ In these, 87 retainers were listed. The vast majority (77) were retained by the Marquess of Dorset, demonstrating that the retainer system for noblemen still continued in the county. Three were retained by Sir Gilbert Thomas, a relative of the Earl of Shrewsbury and two by Sir William Compton, an influential courtier. The remaining five were retained by Sir Thomas Blount. At Stone, he retained an archer named Thomas Buckenyll, who held goods worth £5.⁷⁶ Thomas Blount would presumably have been called upon to supply Buckenyll's equipment if he was required to fight since, of the nine archers and six billmen named in the parish, only one (John Richards) owned a bow and arrows. His remaining four retainers in 1522 were listed as living in Kidderminster, with one archer and three billmen named.⁷⁷ Sir Thomas Blount also had two further servants listed as living in Chaddelsey Corbett in Worcestershire in the lay subsidy returns for 1524. Returns for the military survey of 1522 for that parish do not survive, but it seems likely that these men were retainers.⁷⁸ Based only on a tiny sample of Thomas Blount's lands in 1522, it is clear that he had the ability to raise a military force through the retainer system. There was nothing

⁷³ TNA SP1/231, f.215.

⁷⁴ TNA SP1/2, f.127; TNA SP1/229, f.53.

⁷⁵ Michael Faraday (ed.), 'Worcestershire Taxes in the 1520s: The Military Survey and Forced Loans of 1522-3 and the Lay Subsidy of 1524-7', ed. Michael Faraday, *Worcestershire Historical Society, New Series*, 19 (2003).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 221-2.

unusual in this. In a letter to Thomas Cromwell dating to the late 1520s, Thomas Blount's son, Sir John Blount of Kinlet, makes it clear that Sir William Compton, the recently deceased patron of his estranged younger brother, Edward, had maintained a local retinue.⁷⁹ According to John, Compton had imprisoned thirty of his servants, while, when he attempted to secure their release, he found that, 'I can have no favour be reyson of my brether and other that were master Comptons servants also here'. Both men's 'servants' look very like retainers as would be understood in a medieval sense of the word. Given the fact that the Blounts were only intermittently called upon to supply troops for war, there must have been a broader purpose to their retaining. This was likely prestige, with the ability to retain men a mark of social status, while such men probably also acted as local officers and servants.

There are many other examples in the Blount family, such as Walter Blount of Uttoxeter and his wife, Mary, who claimed that a neighbouring gentleman, George Draycott, was able to muster forty armed men to forcibly enter their land and assault them and their servants.⁸⁰ In 1543 Thomas Blount of Sodington was accused in Star Chamber of arraying twelve men 'lyk men of warr' during a dispute over common land in the manor of Sillingford, with his opponent, Thomas Meysey, arriving with nine or ten men of his own.⁸¹ In a separate matter, Sir George Blount also expressed himself in military terms, complaining that Thomas Meysey's men had entered the Forest of Wyre, of which he was steward, and 'hunted within the said forest in warlike manner', acting, after killing a deer, 'as yf they had trewlie gotten and won a greate victorie and upper hande' shooting their arrows in the air in a celebration, something that was 'visible to the greate terror and fere of all the country'.⁸² George's uncle,

⁷⁹ TNA SP1/68, f.116.

⁸⁰ TNA STAC2/17/220.

⁸¹ TNA STAC2/20/370; TNA STAC2/24/101; TNA STAC10/4/32.

⁸² TNA STAC5/B5/3.

Walter, described a similar event in 1557 when he claimed that, as keeper of Bewdley Park, he had been assaulted by Sir Robert Acton and twenty of his men ‘beinge arraigned in manner of warre’.⁸³ Acton, apparently, ‘in this said riotous passage through the said park made dyvers great exclamations and blowing of hornes to thentent by such quarrellinge meanes to dispose your said subject his servants and frendes to come for the that the said riotous persons might then and there brawl and fight with them’. George’s men, too, could appear ‘arrayed in manner of warre’ in local disputes, as alleged in a Star Chamber case dating from 1554-8.⁸⁴ While allegations of violence in Star Chamber proceedings must be treated with caution (as set out in chapter 2), the idea that members of the gentry could muster forces of local men was clearly considered probable. It is difficult to see any distinction between these peacetime servants and the retainers that the men could muster for war.

Indeed, it is difficult to see any distinction in the way that George made use of his retainers in comparison with his grandfathers, Hugh Peshall and Thomas Blount. In the Star Chamber case of *Blount v. Chetwynd*, for example, the defendant’s Answer asserted that fourteen of George’s servants were sent to plough a common, entering into a violent disturbance with the servants of another local gentleman.⁸⁵ In another case, in relation to George’s manor of Over Tene in Staffordshire, George was accused of sending his servants to violently enter the claimant’s house to seize goods.⁸⁶ Like Hugh, George Blount clearly had the power to compel men to take up arms on his behalf.

⁸³ TNA STAC4/4/54.

⁸⁴ TNA STAC4/5/47.

⁸⁵ Boyd, ‘Proceedings of the court of Star Chamber, Temp. Henry VIII and Edward VI’, 77-78.

⁸⁶ *Bolt v. Blount*, Bundle 26, No.68 (‘Star Chamber proceedings Henry VIII and Edward VI’).

Court records also provide information on the way that men were enlisted to accompany Sir George Blount on Henry VIII's Boulogne campaign in 1545 and the Duke of Somerset's war in Scotland in 1547. In one Star Chamber case, several local witnesses recalled that Thomas Southall, one of George's tenants at Kinlet, had served under George in these campaigns 'and none of all the lordship went at that tyme but onlie he'.⁸⁷ Thomas Southall considered it his duty to offer his landlord military service, since it was also noted that he and his brother had 'set forthe Thomas Bishop of their owne cost and charge to go with the said Sir George to Norwich at the comosion tyme [i.e. Kett's Rebellion] to serve the king'. This was remembered to have been at the Southall brothers' 'proper costs and chardge, and also over and besides that the said George had of them xiii s iiii d paide to the hand of Sir Alan Cliff vicar then'. The Southall brothers' recruitment of a mercenary to serve with George during Kett's Rebellion in their stead demonstrates just how real the obligations of retainership had remained: in order to ensure that they did not have to attend, they sent a substitute. Up until at least the late 1550s, there is nothing in relation to the Blount family to suggest a change in the way that retainers were organised or used, with Sir George Blount of Kinlet retaining men in much the same way as his grandfathers, as well as being retained himself.

Preferment in the Tudor period was not always through military service, with Sir George Blount of Kinlet knighted long before he joined Henry VIII on campaign in France in the 1540s, for example.⁸⁸ However, it was certainly a route to national recognition in all periods under consideration here: the wealthy Humphrey Peshall, for example, who fought in no

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ *Valor Ecclesiasticus Temp. Henr. VIII. Auctoritate Regia Institutus*, vol 3 (1817), 251 refers to him as a knight in 1535.

known campaigns, was never knighted, while his son, Hugh, was knighted in reward for his military service. George's grandfather, Sir Thomas Blount, was one of fifty men singled out for reward by Henry VIII in Tournai Cathedral at the king's official entrance to the captured city in 1513, with Thomas created a knight banneret.⁸⁹ George's brother, William, was knighted by Henry VIII at Boulogne on 30 September 1544, apparently dying in action not long afterwards.⁹⁰ As such, it is unsurprising that gentlemen saw themselves in military terms. Thomas Blount's third son, Walter Blount of Astley, who was a wealthy landowner through marriage, was described in a 1522 survey as a billman in Ombersely in Worcestershire.⁹¹ He was clearly considered militarily capable since, of the 125 men listed in the parish, only 38 were identified as billmen and 11 as archers, indicating that not everyone was suitable for service. This identification as a potential billman, even though there is no actual evidence that he ever went to war, again strongly supports the view that men in the period were viewed as potential soldiers even at times when their military service was not actually required. Indeed, it was part of a gentleman's role and an important element in the self-identification, as can be seen in the ways in which they commonly chose to depict themselves in armour on their tomb memorials (as Walter did on his tomb in Astley church, which was commissioned by his son).

Since gentlemen had always viewed themselves in relation to the military, it is no surprise that members of the Blount family offered willing service in war. Several members served in

⁸⁹ Charles Cruickshank, *The English Occupation of Tournai 1513-1519* (Oxford, 1971), 67; *L&P* 1, Appendix 26.

⁹⁰ *L&P* 19 part 2, 334; <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1509-1558/member/blount-william-1514-44-or-later> accessed 23/3/15.

⁹¹ Faraday, *Worcestershire Taxes in the 1520s*, 30. For the identification of this Walter Blount as Walter Blount of Astley, see Birmingham Archives MS 3200/ACC 1919-032/281233 which deals with a later partition of Acton family land at Belbroughton by the husbands of the two Acton heiresses – Walter Blount of Astley and Thomas Barnaby.

France with Henry VIII in 1544, including John Blount of Grendon, Thomas Blount of Kidderminster and the brothers George and William Blount of Kinlet.⁹² As set out above, George Blount provided a retinue in this campaign, albeit that this was at the command of the Crown rather than a nobleman, something which contrasts his service from that of his grandfather, Hugh Peshall, who brought a retinue to serve Lord Stanley at Bosworth Field.⁹³ Arguably, George Blount's service in 1544 can be seen as quasi-feudal, as identified by Goring and supported by Gunn's recent work. As acknowledged by historians, however, it is difficult to draw a distinct line between the retaining of the medieval period and that of the early Tudor period. The medieval retainer system had itself evolved over time, with the indenture system moving from one based on land ownership to promises of good lordship (essentially a client-patron relationship).⁹⁴ The rewards received by Humphrey Blount from Edward IV, for example, are also indicative of a desire by the first Yorkist king to retain his services in a way that could be interpreted as 'quasi-feudal' in the late fifteenth century. The Blounts support the prevailing historiography by highlighting the range of retaining that could apply in the period while, at the same time, providing some evidence in support of quasi-feudalism.

Royal Military Service

By the time of Henry VIII's coronation, John Blount of Kinlet had been appointed as one of the King's Spears. This was a very prestigious appointment, limited to fifty gentlemen descended from the nobility and intended by the king both for display and as his personal bodyguard.⁹⁵ As the articles of the Spears set out, their function was military, based on a

⁹² TNA SP 1/184, f.76; *L&P* 19 part 2, 524.

⁹³ Adams, 'Patronage of the crown', 31.

⁹⁴ Adams, 'Patronage of the crown', 25; Dunham, 'Lord Hastings', 9; Rapple, *Martial Power*, 38.

⁹⁵ BL Cotton MS Titus A XIII, f.186-189.

concern that there were many young gentlemen ‘which have no exercise in the feats of Arms in handling and running the spear and other feats of war on horseback’. The intent was to give them the means ‘that they shall exercise the said feat of arms and be the more meet and able to serve their prince as well in time of war as otherwise’.⁹⁶ Each Spear was required to have a page, with both men maintaining a horse and other equipment ‘convenient and necessary for a man of arms’. They had to lodge where the king told them, ensuring that they remained close to him. Although professional soldiers, they resembled a retinue, with their role in peacetime likely to have been both to serve the king and to increase his prestige.

Although the expensive Spears were disbanded early in the reign, Henry VIII still required a retinue of men to attend him in times of peace and war. John Blount’s service as a Spear can be compared to his role at the Field of Cloth of Gold, which he attended as one of the Staffordshire gentlemen, along with his father, who represented Shropshire.⁹⁷ As a meeting of friendship between two previously warring monarchs (Henry VIII and Francis I of France), this event has been characterised as a ‘chivalric peace’, which ensured that the status of both kings was protected.⁹⁸ Equally, the use of military terminology in relation to the planning and recruitment of men highlights the still considerable dominance of military thinking in the period, with detailed lists of participants drawn up to ensure that the retinues of both kings matched.⁹⁹ While Henry VIII was, of course, at the head of the men that he took to France, leading churchmen and noblemen in attendance also took their own retinues, as set out in official lists of the meeting.¹⁰⁰ Even the knights were permitted each to bring one chaplain, eleven servants and eight horsemen, something which must have given the king’s company

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ *L&P* 3, 703.

⁹⁸ Glenn Richardson, *The Field of Cloth of Gold* (New Haven, 2013), 8.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 79.

¹⁰⁰ Joycelyne Gledhill Russell, *The Field of the Cloth of Gold* (London, 1969), 191-204.

the appearance of a military campaign.¹⁰¹ Both the Spears and the Field of the Cloth of Gold indicate the continuing pervasiveness of the military in the early Tudor period, particularly in relation to the nobility and gentry: retinues were still required both in peace and war.

The Growth of the Militia

The growth in importance of the militia has been traditionally seen as a means by which the monarch was able to levy troops directly, outside of noblemen's retinues, albeit that it is now usually acknowledged that it continued to exist alongside the retinue system to a certain extent.¹⁰² While the impetus for raising the militia came from the central government, as Younger has identified, the administration was based entirely in the localities, with an analysis of the militia in the period therefore of considerable importance in historians' understanding of local politics and the interactions between the centre and the localities.

The militia had always been a means by which kings could raise troops, with writs surviving from the late thirteenth century for Staffordshire and Shropshire, for example.¹⁰³ Sir John Blount of Sodington, who died before 1427/8, was appointed commissioner of array in Worcestershire by the king in September 1403 'to pick out a suitable number of the best men and take them to ... Hereford with all speed to go with the king to Wales to resist the rebels'.¹⁰⁴ As leaders of the local community, members of the Blount family were frequently employed to raise militia troops in the Tudor period. In 1539, Walter Blount of Uttoxeter,

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 195.

¹⁰² Cruickshank, *Elizabeth's Army*, 7; Fissel, *English Warfare*, 8; Goring, 'Military Obligations', 5; Gunn, Grummitt and Cools, *War, State, and Society*, 21.

¹⁰³ Wrottesley, 'An account of the military service performed by Staffordshire tenants in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries', 10, 11.

¹⁰⁴ Driver, 'Worcestershire Knights', 29.

was one of the commissioners appointed to muster ‘all and singular men at arms and armed men capable for arms, as well archers as other men, horse and foot, above the age of sixteen years, resident in the several places within the County of Stafford’.¹⁰⁵ Walter Blount of Astley was similarly appointed for Halfshire Hundred in Worcestershire and his Blount of Sodington cousins for Doddingtree Hundred, where their home of Mamble was situated.¹⁰⁶

The survival of musters for Shropshire, Worcestershire, Herefordshire and Staffordshire is very poor. The 1539 muster returns for Grendon Warren, Marston and Grendon Bishop in Herefordshire do not survive, but those for 1542 do. These show a community headed by the elderly Sir John Blount of Grendon, a distant cousin of the Blounts of Kinlet.¹⁰⁷ He was found to possess horse and harness for two men, while his parish included eleven men suitable to serve as billmen and four as archers.¹⁰⁸ In total, the parish possessed three additional pairs of harnesses, one breastplate, one set of archer’s equipment and a bow, four sallet helmets, four bills, three pairs of splints and one horse – far from sufficient to furnish the men that the parish could raise. Unfortunately, no musters for the period survive for Stottesdon Hundred in Shropshire, where Kinlet is situated. Nonetheless, musters for other Shropshire hundreds also show a similar reliance on archers and billmen, with inadequate equipment in many cases.¹⁰⁹ The position had improved in Shropshire by 1580, although the amount of weapons were still inadequate. For Stottesdon Hundred, for example, in 1580, there were only 55 pikes, 33 bills, 32 bows and 2 guns, in spite of the fact that there were 250

¹⁰⁵ ‘The Muster Roll of Staffordshire of AD 1539 (Offlow Hundred), ed. W. Boyd, *Collections for a History of Staffordshire*, New Series, 4 (1901), 215.

¹⁰⁶ TNA SP1/146, f.1.

¹⁰⁷ Wrottesley, ‘Military service performed by Staffordshire tenants during the reign of Richard II’, 243.

¹⁰⁸ *The Herefordshire Musters of 1539 and 1542*, ed. Michael Faraday (2012), 164-5.

¹⁰⁹ ‘Muster Rolls of the Hundreds of Bradford, Munslow, &c., AD 1532-1540’, ed. C.H. Drinkwater, *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*, 3rd series, 8 (1908), 245-286.

men able to fight.¹¹⁰ Similarly, a survey of wills drawn up for men living in the parish of Kinlet in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries shows that only one man – John Browne alias Smith, who died in 1572 and was a prominent member of the community – made any reference to military equipment when he left his ‘shortest sword’ and his ‘best sword and my buckler’ to his sons.¹¹¹ The lack of any other evidence of military equipment in the wills suggests that it was not a community well-equipped for war. While Goring contends that this inadequacy of weaponry, which was nationwide and first noted by the government in 1522, encouraged the king to enforce the statutory provisions more rigorously, there is little evidence of this from the examples above.¹¹² Instead, where there is significant evidence of weaponry is in the hands of the local gentry. Legal cases concerning the Blounts from the 1540s onwards make it clear that both they and their gentry neighbours possessed a significant store of armaments, with which they equipped their servants. These included bills, staves, swords, bucklers, daggers, longbows and arrows, crossbows, long staves, forest bills, forks and clubs.¹¹³ While, again, accusations of violence in Star Chamber cases in particular are suspicious (see chapter 2), the specific lists of weaponry do suggest the kinds of armaments it was believable for the gentry to possess, while the violence alleged in some cases does appear to have been genuine.¹¹⁴ Such private armouries would have been essential to the militia, demonstrating that the compliance of the local gentry in the raising and equipping of the militia was essential.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ ‘A Particular Certificate for the Countie of Salop, 1580’ in W. Phillips (ed.), ‘Papers relating to the trained soldiers of Shropshire in the reign of Queen Elizabeth’, *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*, 2nd Series, 2 (1890), 215-294.

¹¹¹ The majority of sixteenth and early seventeenth-century wills relating to Kinlet are held in the Hereford Diocesan Record Office.

¹¹² Goring, ‘Military Obligations’, 22.

¹¹³ TNA STAC3/3/37; TNA STAC2/20/370; TNA STAC2/27/68; TNA STAC5/B5/3; TNA STAC2/17/220; TNA STAC4/4/54; TNA STAC4/5/47.

¹¹⁴ For example, William Warton’s 1554/8 Star Chamber claim against George Blount of Kinlet in which he alleged that both his arms were partially severed – details that would have been easy to confirm by interviewing Warton (TNA STAC4/5/47).

¹¹⁵ Younger, *War and Politics*, 138.

The essential role played by the local gentry can also be seen in the evidence of militia musters. On 27 June 1563, faced with conflict with France, Elizabeth I sent a letter to the eighteen Justices of the Peace in Shropshire (who included Sir George Blount of Kinlet), requiring them ‘to assemble your selves together, and to consider your latest levy of generall musters, and thereupon, without any generall assembly or trouble of our peple, to devyse amongst your selves how, with most expedicion, and lest trouble, the number of five hundred soldyars myght be put in redynesse, and so they only mustered and no more’.¹¹⁶ The Justices were required to choose only ‘the most ableste men for servyce’, as well as ensuring ‘that sume of the best yn degree, yn that shyre, being no barons, and yet mete to take charge of men, may be ordered to be the capteynes and conductors of the same’. George and four other men were specifically asked to raise men in four of the hundreds. Between them, they levied 122 men, with 39 of these coming from Stottesdon Hundred, where Kinlet is situated. As a county, only 456 men were actually levied, with Bradford Hundred supplying the most with 100 men. Most of the other hundreds produced around thirty to forty men, making George Blount’s efforts fairly standard. As well as supplying men, the commissioners were also required to arm them at the county’s expense, with 30s to be raised for each man from the towns of the shire.¹¹⁷

Although the monarch ordered the raising of the militia, the administration took place at a local level, with the county gentry particularly involved. In 1596, for example, the Justices for Staffordshire, of whom Sir Christopher Blount of Kidderminster was one, considered orders they had given for men to be mustered at Lichfield on 5 April 1596.¹¹⁸ Men were not

¹¹⁶ Phillips, ‘Trained soldiers of Shropshire’, 230.

¹¹⁷ ‘A Particular Certificate for the County of Salop, 1580’ in Phillips, ‘Trained soldiers of Shropshire’.

¹¹⁸ ‘The Staffordshire Quarter Session Rolls Vol III 1594-1597’, ed. S.A.H. Burne, *Collections for a History of Staffordshire* (1933), 156.

always eager to be mustered and the process was notoriously corrupt.¹¹⁹ Of the six ‘sufficient men’ from Hansworth whom the parish constable, John Wellis, was required to bring to the Lichfield muster, only five appeared and, then, four were declared insufficient for service by Christopher’s deputy, John Norton, who pressed the constable ‘to serve in one of their stedes not withstanding the worst of them ther refused were more sufficient for servise then he this examinant beinge above the age of 40 yeares’. Although this account rests only on the constable’s testimony, it is plausible that Christopher’s servant took financial bribes from the four men to ensure that they were not pressed. He only agreed to release the constable on the payment of 10s, while the servant of another magistrate, Sir John Bowes, received a bribe of 8s at the same time. The process was evidently open to considerable corruption, as William Shakespeare satirised in Act III scene 2 of *Henry IV part II*, when Sir John Falstaff accepted bribes to release the best men of the town from being mustered. The Earl of Leicester also complained in 1586 that he received only poor quality men to serve him in the Netherlands from a muster in the shires, since ‘there was abuse in the levye of those that were sent before, many of them being househoulders, and maryed men, and of bodye not fit for this service’.¹²⁰ It was a duty of the Justices to prosecute those who failed to attend musters, with Sir Christopher Blount regularly hearing these prosecutions in Staffordshire.¹²¹ Christopher was often ordered to take musters in Staffordshire. For example on 25 November 1596, the privy council ordered him to muster the men ‘fytt for service’ in the county, as well as to ensure that their weapons were serviceable.¹²² He received a similar appointment the following month.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Cruickshank, *Elizabeth’s Army*, 132.

¹²⁰ *Correspondence of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leycester, During his Government of the Low Countries, in the Years 1585 and 1586*, ed. John Bruce (London, 1844), 86.

¹²¹ ‘The Staffordshire Quarter Session Rolls vol IV 1598-1602’, ed. S.A.H. Burne, *Collections for a History of Staffordshire* (1936), 294.

¹²² *Acts of the Privy Council of England, vol 26, 1596-1597*, ed. John Roche Dasent (London, 1902), 331.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 25 December 1596.

The important role played by the local gentry in the militia was highlighted by Goring, who noted that geographical proximity was not solely responsible for which county militias were summoned for which campaigns, as would arguably be expected, with a correlation instead evident between the proposed captain and the counties in which they held lands.¹²⁴ This can be seen with the Blounts since, when the militia was mustered for an expedition to Cadiz in March 1596, the letters were carried by Christopher Blount to Gloucestershire, Shropshire, Warwickshire, Worcestershire and Staffordshire, with it intended that he would lead the troops raised. These were areas where Christopher and his Blount relatives had considerable local prominence and interest, indicating that such local patronage networks were taken into account, even when the instructions were addressed to the militia.¹²⁵

Court and Noble Patronage

Chains of Patronage

Historians have recognised a constriction in the inner circle at court under Henry VII, with the king becoming increasingly difficult to access, something which was accompanied by a growth in importance of the privy chamber as opposed to household knights and esquires.¹²⁶ Henry VII famously appointed a number of 'new men' to positions of authority, such as Richard Empson and Edmund Dudley, along with less well known servants, such as Sir Henry Wyatt.¹²⁷ As Gunn has noted, while not strictly speaking based on meritocracy, the

¹²⁴ Goring, 'Military Obligations', 59.

¹²⁵ *Acts of the Privy Council of England*, vol 25, 1595-1596, ed. John Roche Dasent (London, 1901) [hereafter APC 25], 323.

¹²⁶ Miller, *Henry VIII and the English Nobility*, 89; Starkey, 'Court, Council, and Nobility', 175; Starkey, *Reign of Henry VIII*, 84.

¹²⁷ Gunn, *New Men*, 3-15.

appointments made by Henry VII were a recognition of the need to utilise talent and provide strong country-wide royal governance in the aftermath of the Wars of the Roses.¹²⁸ Henry VIII's style of kingship was more accessible, although the privy chamber continued to have privileged access to the king. While the men closest to the first Tudor monarchs were often royal servants rather than great magnates and thus had greater ties of personal devotion to the king, they were added to existing ideas of patronage rather than existing separately. These new men, with their privileged access to the king effectively sidestepped the nobility to reach the head of patronage networks. Chains of patronage had always existed, with direct access to the king in either the medieval or Tudor periods never guaranteed for the gentry, who instead often relied on the nobility or other favoured patrons as an intermediate tier in their access to crown patronage.¹²⁹ Henry VII's and, later, Henry VIII's new men, effectively took the place of noble patrons in some places, but due to the power they wielded they became important patrons in their own right.¹³⁰ It was necessary for individuals to find a place within patronage networks, with their rivals similarly seeking patronage of their own.

Blounts attempted to access royal favour indirectly through patronage. John Blount of Kinlet became embroiled in a dispute with Sir William Compton when he challenged his father's will in 1524, which named Compton as trustee.¹³¹ Compton, as the king's Groom of the Stool, was then one of Henry VIII's most favoured courtiers and a formidable rival (even after his early death). In 1530, on being troubled by some of the late Compton's servants, John sought to obtain Thomas Cromwell's patronage, a policy that his widow, Katherine, later followed. She was paying an annuity to Cromwell by September 1532, in return for his

¹²⁸ Ibid., 35.

¹²⁹ Adams, *Leicester and the Court*, 28; Loades, *Tudor Court*, 85; McFarlane, *Nobility of Later Medieval England*, 120.

¹³⁰ Gunn, *New Men*, 33.

¹³¹ TNA C1/385/10.

favour, for example.¹³² By addressing a request for assistance to Cromwell directly and offering him a horse by way of inducement, John hoped to access royal favour, to which Cromwell was, by then, a major beneficiary.

With this in mind, it is possible to view royal patronage at work in the appointment of Henry Blount, the son of Sir John and Katherine Blount of Kinlet, to Thomas Cromwell's household by at least 4 August 1537, where he remained until at least July 1539.¹³³ In 1538 Henry Blount was considered one of the 'gentlemen most mete to be daily waiters upon my said lord [Cromwell] and allowed in his house', although he was not one of the household gentlemen selected by the minister 'to be preferred unto the king's majesty's service'.¹³⁴ He was clearly a valued servant, although not in receipt of the highest level of patronage, as the decision not to promote him to the king's service shows. It does however demonstrate that direct royal patronage was seen as the ultimate goal through service to Cromwell (and, thus, indirect service to the king himself).

It was usual for the gentry and nobility to seek out higher ranking or better placed connections at court, since they were higher up the chain of patronage. Thanks to the family relationship with Henry Fitzroy (whose mother was Elizabeth Blount of Kinlet), Fitzroy's three uncles, George (then aged twelve and the future Sir George Blount of Kinlet), William (aged eleven or ten) and Henry Blount (aged seven or eight) were educated in his household after he was created Duke of Richmond and Somerset in 1525 at the age of six. Given the king's direct interest in his son's household, these positions must have been approved by

¹³² *L&P* 5, 1285.

¹³³ *L&P* 14 part 2, 782.

¹³⁴ *L&P* 13 part 2, 1538.

Henry VIII himself. Fitzroy's maternal half-brother, George Tailboys, also regularly received his outgrown clothes. Patronage of family members was seen as natural in Tudor England. This point was much later voiced by Robert Cecil in relation to the wider Blount family's kinship with Lord Mountjoy. When writing in 1600 to Walter Blount of Astley, who had asked him to speak to Lord Mountjoy in an attempt to secure a place for him in his army in Ireland, Cecil replied that 'for me to commend a Blunt to a Lord Mountjoy must savour of some extraordinary private end', implying that the idea of a non-family member speaking to the head of the family on behalf of another member was ridiculous: patronage was expected to come from within the wider family unit.¹³⁵ Once again, such a network was an element in crown patronage. The ultimate goal was still to obtain preferment with the monarch at the top of all patronage networks: it was Elizabeth I who appointed Lord Mountjoy and paid for his army, while Robert Cecil was her chief minister.

The Dudleys and the Blounts

The importance of personal relationships in Tudor patronage networks can be seen in relation to the Blounts and the Dudleys. The families were related through the Croft family, who had significant court connections thanks to their association with the Earls of March and, thus, also the Yorkist and Tudor royal families.¹³⁶ Sir Richard Croft (Sir Thomas Blount of Kinlet's father-in-law) served as Henry VII's treasurer of the household until 1494, when he became steward of Prince Arthur's household.¹³⁷ It was probably through him that Sir

¹³⁵ *Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Most Hon. The Marquis of Salisbury, Preserved at Hatfield House, Hertfordshire, Part 10* (London, 1904), 80, 87.

¹³⁶ *Calendar of Ancient Petitions Relating to Wales*, ed. W. Rees (Cardiff, 1975), 531-2. Sir Richard Croft of Croft Castle was the father-in-law of Sir Thomas Blount of Kinlet. Croft's wife, by her first marriage, was the great-grandmother of Jane Guildford, the wife of John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland. Lady Croft was also mother of the wife of Thomas West, 8th Lord de la Warr.

¹³⁷ Sir Richard Croft's will refers to his Blount granddaughter, Joyce, for example (TNA PROB 11/16).

Thomas Blount was appointed to Prince Arthur's household in Ludlow in 1502.¹³⁸ By the mid-sixteenth century, the familial connection was distant, with Thomas Blount of Kidderminster and Sir George Blount of Kinlet, who were particularly associated with the Duke and Duchess of Northumberland, actually only related to the Duchess through one shared great-grandmother. There is however evidence of the Blounts, Dudleys, Guildfords and de la Warr families (all of whom descended from Sir Richard Croft's wife) interacting in the sixteenth century, suggesting that the relationship was acknowledged, while Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, always referred to Thomas Blount of Kidderminster in correspondence as 'Cousin Blount', something that was a common way of acknowledging and reinforcing often quite distant relatedness.¹³⁹

This kinship relationship cannot be the sole reason for the Dudleys' patronage of the Blounts. Twenty of Lady Croft's children survived childhood with 'seventeen score and odd people descended from her body' recorded at her death.¹⁴⁰ The Dudleys did not patronise all of these relatives and the position therefore very much supports David Cressy's observation that 'kinship involved a range of possibilities, rather than a set of concrete obligations', with the relationships of distant kin 'latent' but with the possibility that a relationship could be awakened but, equally, that it could be ignored.¹⁴¹ As Keith Wrightson notes, too, not all individuals seem to have interpreted what exactly constituted kin in the same way, nor viewed their obligations (or lack of them) in the same light.¹⁴² While he considers that

¹³⁸ *The Receyt of the Ladie Kateryne*, ed. Gordon Kipling (Oxford, 1990), 81-87.

¹³⁹ For example, *L&P* 13 part 2, 1117 where George Blount of Kinlet, John Dudley, Owen West and John Guildford stood surety for Thomas West, Lord de la Warr in 1538. Sir George Blount of Kinlet later served as the Duchess of Northumberland's executor (TNA PROB 11/37/342); O'Day, *The Family and Family Relationships*, 126.

¹⁴⁰ Childe Pemberton, *Elizabeth Blount*, 43-44.

¹⁴¹ Cressy, *Kinship and Kin Interaction*, 49, 67.

¹⁴² Wrightson, *Household and Kinship*, 156.

kinship was of limited importance in the period, it was considered to create a bond between the Dudleys and the Blounts, with the relationship acknowledged in numerous sources. Cressy drew similar conclusions in relation to his research into transatlantic correspondence in the seventeenth century.¹⁴³ So too did Anne Mitson in her work on seventeenth-century Nottinghamshire.¹⁴⁴ Miriam Slater's work on the Verneys also identified the use of the term 'friendship' in relation to instances where kin were expected to offer a favour or a service, indicating that such relationships were expected.¹⁴⁵ Vivienne Larminie highlighted the importance of kinship to the Newdigates of Arbury, with such links frequently providing financial support, access to careers, marriage and the royal court.¹⁴⁶ Both she and Barry Coward, in his study of the Stanley family, however noted that kinship was not enough to guarantee aid, with close personal interaction also necessary once the relationship was acknowledged.¹⁴⁷ Effectively, kinship could open the door to friendship, but friendship was what led to patronage. It is therefore not possible to assume that kinship included a duty to support.¹⁴⁸

For an acknowledgement of relatedness, in a period where so many were distantly related to each other, there must have been personal connection and social links as well as a desire to be patronised and to seek out the support of higher-ranking kin. While O'Day considers that, although there are similarities, kinship relationships should not be viewed on the same terms as relationships of patron and client, since patronage was freely offered while there was an obligation to assist kin, the selective nature of kinship ties that were acknowledged (as shown

¹⁴³ Cressy, *Kinship and Kin Interaction*, 46.

¹⁴⁴ Mitson, 'The Significance of Kinship Networks', 43.

¹⁴⁵ Slater, *The Weightiest Business*, 30.

¹⁴⁶ Larminie, *Wealth, Kinship and Culture*, 124.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁴⁸ Finch, *Family Obligations*, 5.

by the Blounts and the Dudleys) does strongly point towards a patronage relationship, even where it was acknowledgement of kinship that first opened the door to a relationship.¹⁴⁹ The support offered by kin falls within the concept of kindness, which Linda Pollock has identified as ‘a multifaceted concept involving affection, courtesy, sympathy, attention, offers of assistance, conferral of favours, and acts of humanity, or thoughtfulness’.¹⁵⁰ While not something that was guaranteed between kin, the concept did play an important role in the establishment of patronage relationships.

This can be seen with Sir James Croft, who, due to his kinship link with John Dudley sailed ‘as a privat man’ when Dudley conveyed the Earl of Hertford’s army to Scotland in 1544.¹⁵¹ Although without an official position, Croft was placed in charge of a quarter of the ship’s men, hoping ‘to lerne how to leade an 100 men, and so returne to my country life againe’. By offering this service and performing it well, he was able to secure Dudley’s patronage, later being appointed as a captain in Dudley’s retinue at Boulogne and then as water-bailiff of the town.¹⁵² While even quite distant kinship was enough to open up the possibility of patronage, it was necessary for the potential client to have something to offer the patron in turn. This can also be seen with the Blount family’s relationship with the Dudleys. Walter Blount of Astley had been amongst the ‘diverse of his friends and followers’ to whom Northumberland had passed manors previously held by the bishop of Worcester.¹⁵³ These were later confiscated by the crown and returned to the church and, while Sir Francis Jobson (the husband of Leicester’s aunt) was able to secure the return of Hartlebury, obtained, as one contemporary

¹⁴⁹ O’Day, *The Family and Family Relationships*, 74.

¹⁵⁰ Linda Pollock, ‘The Practice of Kindness in Early Modern Elite Society’, *Past and Present*, 211 (2011), 121-58.

¹⁵¹ ‘The Autobiography of Sir James Croft’, ed. R.E. Ham, *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 50 (1977), 50.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁵³ TNA SP15/12.

asserted, ‘by my lord of Leicester’s help’, Walter received no such assistance in retaining Wichenford nor any compensation.¹⁵⁴ Kinship relationship or not, Leicester was not prepared to offer his patronage to Walter at this time, indicating once again a patronage relationship was intended to be a mutually beneficial one.

Blounts were frequently able to be useful to the Dudleys, with several family members serving in the households of Northumberland or his sons, Leicester and Ambrose Dudley, Earl of Warwick.¹⁵⁵ Patronage connections could have several layers. It was probably the connection to Thomas Blount of Kidderminster that secured the stewardship of the Earl of Warwick’s manor of Stratford for his son-in-law, John Combe, who served between 1567 and 1582.¹⁵⁶ The Dudleys’ following has been characterised as a family affinity, centred on Wales and the Midlands, and this can be seen in their patronage of the Blounts: they had the advantage both of being family members (albeit distant), as well as well-situated geographically to permit them to be useful, since the Dudleys were not resident in the area.¹⁵⁷ Both the Earls of Warwick and Leicester had the largest aristocratic interest in the West Midlands, something that required local office holders and networks.¹⁵⁸ Peers had always relied on the local gentry as members of their retinues to support their interests in the

¹⁵⁴ *A History of the County of Worcester, vol 3* (London, 1913) [hereafter *VCH Worcestershire 3*], 561-566.

¹⁵⁵ Gilbert Blount of Kidderminster and Humphrey Blount received Leicester’s livery in 1567-8, with Humphrey also attending the earl’s funeral in 1588. John Blount of Warwick (a Kidderminster Blount) served Leicester by August 1585. Sir George Blount of Kinlet was probably a member of Leicester’s household in 1558-9 when he was twice entrusted by Dudley to make payments on his behalf. His nephew, George Blount of Bewdley, appears in Leicester’s accounts for 1558-9, probably as a minor household official. Leicester purchased a livery coat and pair of hose for him in 1559 and in 1567-8 (*Household Accounts and Disbursement Books of Robert Dudley Earl of Leicester, 1558-1561, 1584-1586*, ed. Simon Adams (Cambridge, 1995), 50, 53, 77, 82-3, 105, 299, 419-20, 426, 427, 454). Sir George Blount of Kinlet was known to be close to the Earl of Warwick. In 1571, one petitioner to the earl felt it necessary to note ‘that Sir George Blount is not my friend nor hathe not borne me any good wyll of love toward me for part of matters that hathe been between parts of hym and me’ (TNA SP15/20).

¹⁵⁶ *The Shakespeare Documents*, vol 2, ed. B.R. Lewis (Stanford, 1940), 326.

¹⁵⁷ Adams, *Leicester and the Court*, 4.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 311.

localities and manage their affairs, and the Dudleys' promotion of the Blounts was no exception.

The lawyer, Thomas Blount of Kidderminster, had by far the most significant links to the Dudleys, serving as Northumberland's Comptroller of the Household.¹⁵⁹ He must have transferred his service to Northumberland's sons almost immediately after his patron's execution in 1553 since Robert Dudley made him chief steward of his mother's manor of Halesowen, which had been transferred to Dudley from Sir George Blount of Kinlet (as the duchess's executor) in November 1555.¹⁶⁰ Thomas was already a manorial tenant there following grants from Northumberland in the 1540s, with this local presence of use to Robert Dudley, who later conveyed the manor to Blount and another former servant of Northumberland's, George Tuckey, in 1558, with the two trusted to act as his nominees in its sale.¹⁶¹ He was also serving Robert Dudley as chief steward of Romsley by October 1556.¹⁶² He was a member of Leicester's household by then and became his principal administrative officer, retaining the role until his death.¹⁶³ He appears regularly in Leicester's surviving accounts from 1558-9, including when he made a loan of £30 – a reasonably substantial sum – to his patron in December 1558, which was repaid a short time later.¹⁶⁴ He was also the 'Cousin Blount' sent by Leicester to investigate his wife's suspicious death in 1560, with Leicester writing to Thomas that 'the greatness and the suddenness of the misfortune doth so perplex me until I do hear from you how the matter standeth, or how this evil should light upon me, considering what the malicious world will bruit, as I can take no rest', the

¹⁵⁹ *Acts of the Privy Council of England, vol 4, 1552-1554*, ed. John Roche Dasent (London, 1892), 324, 342.

¹⁶⁰ Adams, *Leicester and the Court*, 157.

¹⁶¹ *VCH Worcestershire 3*, 136-146.

¹⁶² *Court Rolls of Romsley 1279-1643*, ed. M. Tompkins (Worcestershire Historical Society, 2017), 677.

¹⁶³ Adams, *Household Accounts*, 464.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 39, 50.

importance of the matter demonstrating the trust Leicester had in Thomas.¹⁶⁵ He continued to investigate the matter in the years following.¹⁶⁶ He is probably the 'Mr Blount', mentioned in the Black Book of Warwick, who arrived in the town on 10 September 1565 as one of two officers of Ambrose Dudley, Earl of Warwick.¹⁶⁷ Ambrose Dudley's 1553 marriage to Elizabeth Tailboys, who was Sir George Blount of Kinlet's niece also helped reinforce the kinship link upon which the patronage was ultimately grounded.¹⁶⁸

In return for his service, Thomas Blount of Kidderminster was well rewarded. He became steward of Leicester's manor of Kenilworth in 1563, for example. It may also have been through Dudley influence that, in 1560, the queen granted him the manor and advowson of Kidderminster, which was in Crown hands following Northumberland's attainder, something which again shows the trickle-down effect of patronage with the crown as the ultimate source of favour.¹⁶⁹ He was appointed to the Council of Wales in 1560, remaining in office until his death in 1567.¹⁷⁰ Although Thomas's home town of Kidderminster was close to the Welsh Marches and Ludlow, he was a member only of a junior branch of the Kinlet Blount family and is unlikely to have obtained such a position alone. Henry Sidney (Leicester's brother-in-law), too, recognised his family relationship with the Blounts. It was probably his influence, when serving as Lord Deputy of Ireland, that permitted Thomas's son, Christopher, to serve in Ireland as an independent soldier between 1565 and 1567, with his position mirroring that of his cousin, Sir James Croft, during Sir John Dudley's campaign in France in the 1540s.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁵ George Adlard, *Amye Robsart and the Earl of Leycester* (Teddington, 2007), 32.

¹⁶⁶ *Historical Manuscripts Commission: Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Most Honourable the Marquis of Salisbury Preserved at Hatfield House, Hertfordshire Part I* (London, 1883), 1151.

¹⁶⁷ *The Black Book of Warwick*, ed. T. Kempe (Warwick, 1898), 8.

¹⁶⁸ Elizabeth Tailboys was in contact with her mother's family. Her uncle, Sir George Blount of Kinlet, for example, was trustee of her manor of Rugby (TNA C1/1290/33).

¹⁶⁹ J.R. Burton, *A History of Kidderminster* (London, 1890), 46.

¹⁷⁰ *Manuscripts of Lord De'Lisle and Dudley*, ed. Kingsford, 323; Penry Williams, *The Council in the Marches of Wales Under Elizabeth I* (Cardiff, 1958), 344-5, 350.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 397.

Christopher, like Croft, soon secured a formal appointment and was serving as a pensioner in the English garrisons in Ireland by February 1567.¹⁷² He was still there in January 1568, in spite of the fact that on 8 February 1567 Colonel Edward Saintlow had written from Derry to inform Sidney that ‘after my coming over I founde aswell by trial as by reports, of those that was acquainted with Blunt’s service, is lesse than able’.¹⁷³ He claimed that, in spite of the fact that Christopher was his kinsman, he had been forced to replace him with another kinsman, Thomas Morgan. He was, however, unable to dismiss Christopher from the army. Such a chain of patronage, passing from Leicester, to Sidney, to Thomas and then his son, Christopher, was not in any way unusual. Thomas, too, was able to pass some of the patronage downwards towards other family members. In May 1566 he stood as surety for his brother, John, and his wife Elizabeth taking a lease of Stoneythorpe manor in Warwickshire, which was held from Robert Dudley in chief.¹⁷⁴ Thomas’s position in Dudley’s household demonstrates the preferential treatment he was able to obtain for his relatives.

Thomas Blount of Kidderminster died in 1567, but Ambrose and Robert Dudley’s patronage continued into the next generation. Thomas’s eldest son, Sir Edward Blount of Kidderminster, was appointed to serve as the Earl of Leicester’s steward at Cleobury Mortimer by at least 1587.¹⁷⁵ His brother, Christopher, as a younger son, received only £10 a year from his father’s will, as well as the remainder of a lease he held of land in Warwickshire where he could pasture 100 animals (reserving pasture for twenty animals for his brother, John Blount).¹⁷⁶ He was reliant on Leicester’s patronage, while he also had links

¹⁷² TNA SP63/21, f.209; TNA SP63/23, f.32i, f.34.

¹⁷³ TNA SP63/20, f.62.

¹⁷⁴ Northamptonshire Record Office Th 826; *VCH Warwickshire* 6, 125-132.

¹⁷⁵ Adams, *Leicester and the Court*, 326; *Lay Subsidy Roll, AD 1603, for the County of Worcester*, ed. John Amphlett (Worcester, 1901), 11, 29.

¹⁷⁶ TNA PROB 11/51/110.

to Ambrose Dudley and considered that he could draw upon the patronage of the Mountjoy Blounts. On 20 June 1588 Christopher Blount wrote from Berke in the Netherlands to his servant, Harry Jeffereys, who was then at the English court, complaining of the lack of funds from the queen to support his company. He confirmed to Jeffereys that 'I have thought good to do this bearer, Captain Walch, some friendship. If therefore you have received my money from my lord of Warwick, pay him twenty pounds. If by that means you be not furnished, be bold to borrow so much of Sir Charles Blount [the future Lord Mountjoy] in my name'.¹⁷⁷

Even many generations from the common ancestor, it is clear that the Blounts of Kidderminster were aware of the family relationship with the Dudleys and, also, the Mountjoys, and prepared to draw upon them for their own preferment. Again, it worked both ways. In 1606, Christopher's brother, Edward, who had no heir, settled his estate on Charles, Lord Mountjoy, who had previously been his patron.¹⁷⁸ The relationship between the Dudleys and the Blounts, and, to a lesser extent, the Mountjoys and the Blounts, highlights the important and mutually beneficial relationship between the families which was sustained over several generations. At its source was a wide range of factors, being founded on kinship, military service, shared local interests and mutual protection, as well as the fact that many members of the Blount family owed their wealth and income to the Dudley connection. It clearly echoes the medieval retainer system, as set out above in relation to Hugh Peshall and Humphrey Stanley, when they agreed to be retained by Lord Hastings, with the relationship then governing almost every aspect of the individual's public lives. The relationship between the Blounts and the Dudleys also continued late into the Elizabethan period, particularly in relation to their involvement in the military.

¹⁷⁷ Lincolnshire Archives 8ANC4/39.

¹⁷⁸ Burton, *History of Kidderminster*, 48.

Elizabethan Military Musters

War in the Netherlands

The analysis above has highlighted the interrelated nature of the systems for raising troops into the mid-Tudor period and the patronage system. It is also pertinent to consider whether these same processes can be seen in the Elizabethan period. David Trim, in an influential thesis on the wars of religion between 1562 and 1610, estimates that approximately 3000 Englishmen were employed by foreign Protestants on average in each of those years.¹⁷⁹ A considerable proportion of English peers fought in the conflicts, which included the long war in the Netherlands in which the Dutch rebelled against Philip of Spain. Historians have commonly viewed the motivation for the English involvement as a desire to participate in a principled defence of the Protestant faith, with troops commonly raised from the affinities of Calvinish noblemen and bound through ties of religious loyalty.¹⁸⁰ However, this argument is not wholly convincing, since it does not necessarily follow that the priorities of the commander were the same as for the men.¹⁸¹ Nonetheless, while the Dutch rebels were not at first entirely Protestant, the conflict quickly took on the character of a religious war, with propaganda published in England helping to slant public opinion.¹⁸² Most of the support offered by Elizabeth was, however, unofficial, with noblemen raising their own troops.¹⁸³ While men undoubtedly chose to fight for ideological reasons and a shared ideology could

¹⁷⁹ David Trim, 'Fighting 'Jacob's Wars' The Employment of English and Welsh Mercenaries in the European Wars of Religion: France and the Netherlands, 1562-1610' (King's College London, PhD thesis, 2002), 27.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 28-9.

¹⁸¹ Rapple, *Martial Power*, 16.

¹⁸² Thomas Churchyard, 'A Plaine or Moste True Reprt of a Daungerous Service' in D. Randall (ed.), *English Military News Pamphlets 1513-1637* (Tempe, 2011), 65; George Gascoigne, 'The Spoyle of Antwerp' in Randall, *Military News Pamphlets*, 10-55; Charles Wilson, *Queen Elizabeth and the Revolt of the Netherlands* (London, 1970), 7.

¹⁸³ Trim, 'Jacob's Wars', 136, 251; R.B. Wernham, *The Making of Elizabethan Foreign Policy 1558-1603* (Berkeley, 1980), 4; Wilson, *Revolt of the Netherlands*, 123.

help to bind together a retinue in the post-Reformation period, religion was not the only reason that a man might serve their patron in war.

Leicester used the retinue system to raise the bulk of his troops for the Netherlands. As he wrote himself to Sir Francis Walsingham, ‘uppon hir first order geven, both from hir self and also confirmed further by your letters by hir majesties commandment, I dyspached, between Thursday night and yesternight iiij a clocke, above 200 lettres to my servaunts, and sondry my frends, to prepare themselves, according to the order I had my self, with all the spede they could possible, to serve hir majestie, under me, in the Low Countreys’.¹⁸⁴ He had a substantial body of men to call upon, with the leases of Leicester’s tenants on his Denbighshire estates, for example, containing the express provision that they were to serve with him ‘in tyme of warre’.¹⁸⁵ He was also responsible for equipping his soldiers, writing to Walsingham in late September 1586 that he had purchased armour and steel saddles ‘as many as must cost me a good pece of money’.¹⁸⁶ The personal nature of the service is clear from a subsequent letter, when Leicester considered that ‘I hope, sir, I may have that I made you acquainted with v or vi c of my owne tenauntes, whom I wyll make as good reconing of as of 1000 of any that as yet gonn over, and no way to increase hir majesties chardges’.¹⁸⁷ His brother, Ambrose Dudley, Earl of Warwick, also brought soldiers.¹⁸⁸ The Earl of Leicester was a staunch Protestant and a number of his Puritan friends regarded the expedition as ‘a crusade for the Gospel’.¹⁸⁹ However, there is no indication that Leicester’s retinue had any choice about where they served, since the earl had a diverse range of contacts.¹⁹⁰ Indeed,

¹⁸⁴ Bruce, *Correspondence of Robert Dudley*, 5.

¹⁸⁵ *Transactions of the Denbighshire History Society*, 24 (1975), 206.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁸⁷ Bruce, *Correspondence of Robert Dudley*, 10-11.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 429.

¹⁸⁹ Adams, *Leicester and the Court*, 176.

¹⁹⁰ Adams, *Leicester and the Court*, 178; Trim, ‘Jacob’s Wars’, 251.

Edward Blount of Kidderminster, who sailed with him in late 1585 was openly Catholic.¹⁹¹ The men of Leicester's retinue were there to serve him and not all of them necessarily saw themselves as part of a religious crusade. Sir Christopher Blount, who sailed for the Netherlands as part of Leicester's army, although then a Protestant (see chapter 6), seems to have viewed the Netherlands as a potential war of Conquest, with Sir Francis Walsingham on 28 April 1588 writing to Christopher and referring to his letters on 'how her Majesty might make profit of the present divisions there betwixt the States and the soldiers and people. That course might be embraced if her Majesty had a disposition to hold fast that which she may lay hold on'.¹⁹² Religion was evidently not his primary concern. Leicester was also quickly forced to request militia troops, asking in December 1585 for 600 or 700 men from England 'to fill up our bands', again making religious motivations – although possible – not certain.¹⁹³

Sir Christopher Blount, who was the son of Thomas Blount of Kidderminster, arrived in the Netherlands with Leicester and served on more than one Dutch campaign, leading a horseband in 1587, for example.¹⁹⁴ He had previously saved the life of Sir Francis Vere at the Battle of Zutphen in September 1586, in which Philip Sidney died.¹⁹⁵ While in the Netherlands he acted as an agent for Sir Francis Walsingham, providing him with information on the army and the political situation there.¹⁹⁶ Christopher's bravery was certainly not in question, as his desire in the summer of 1588 to be 'placed very near the enemy' attests.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹¹ R.C. Strong and J.A. Van Dorsten, *Leicester's Triumph* (Leiden, 1962), 110.

¹⁹² *Historical Manuscripts Commission: Report on the Manuscripts of the Earl of Ancaster, Preserved at Grimsthorpe* (London, 1907), 131.

¹⁹³ Bruce, *Correspondence of Robert Dudley*, 27.

¹⁹⁴ TNA SP84/31, f.189.

¹⁹⁵ Cyril Falls, *Mountjoy: Elizabethan General* (London, 1955), 28.

¹⁹⁶ TNA SP84/23, f.109; *Manuscripts of the Earl of Ancaster*, 154-5; *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign: Elizabeth*, vol 22, *July-December 1588* (London, 1936) [hereafter *CSP Foreign* 22], 162-3; TNA SP 12/247, f.46.

¹⁹⁷ *Manuscripts of the Earl of Ancaster*, 136.

He and a fellow officer, Captain Shirley, led the doomed defence of Rheinberg.¹⁹⁸ There was a fear - reported to England – that when the garrison fell, ‘two of her Majesty’s best cornets of horse, Blunt and Shurley’s’ would be lost.¹⁹⁹ Even after Leicester returned to England, Christopher remained within his patronage networks, with a letter that he wrote in June 1588 requesting financial assistance from the Earl of Warwick, for example, with which to pay his troops.²⁰⁰ As late as July 1588 he was also describing himself as ‘captain of the Earl of Leicester’s company’, in spite of the fact that his troops by that stage were mostly Dutch.²⁰¹ Only a few months before, Christopher and his friend, Captain Anthony Shirley, had also petitioned Leicester’s lieutenant in the Netherlands for an English company which had previously been offered to the Dutch by its Captain.²⁰² Leicester also continued to rely on Christopher’s reports from the Netherlands to keep him informed regarding matters there, with the Earl relaying ‘the advice of Mr Digges and Mr Christopher Blunt’ to Lord Burghley regarding the Netherlands on 18 October 1587.²⁰³ Also, with Leicester’s absence, Christopher struggled to get his expenses paid, complaining regularly to the new English commander, Lord Willoughby.²⁰⁴ In May 1588, for example, he owed £1800 to the city of Utrecht for his troop’s expenses.²⁰⁵

Leicester himself considered that he still had a responsibility towards Christopher. From England on 12 June 1588, he wrote to Lord Willoughby to ‘thank you for the favour you doe continually show to my friends there and specially to my servant Capt. Blount’, indicating the

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 153.

¹⁹⁹ *CSP Foreign* 22, 93.

²⁰⁰ *Manuscripts of the Earl of Ancaster*, 154.

²⁰¹ *CSP Foreign* 22, 30; *Manuscripts of the Earl of Ancaster*, 121.

²⁰² *CSP Foreign* 22, 30.

²⁰³ Ibid., 247.

²⁰⁴ *Manuscripts of the Earl of Ancaster*, 191, 223.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 133.

degree of favour in which Christopher was held and that he was considered one of Leicester's 'friends' (i.e. clients).²⁰⁶ Leicester acknowledged that the loyalty these men owed him as patron was superior to that which they owed to Willoughby as their military commander, with the Earl including in his letter the assurance that 'I doe protest and assure your lordship that longer than they shall behave themselves to you in all commandments and duty as they would toward my self if I move them: I will neither speake to your lordship for them nor think well of any them then'. That same month Christopher referred to himself in a letter to Leicester as 'a man that was known to be yours', something which had caused him political difficulties in the Netherlands.²⁰⁷ Christopher was anxious to retain his patron's favour, writing in the same letter to complain of his treatment by the English commanders there and, in particular, Lord Willoughby, before arguing that everything that he had done contrary to Willoughby's instructions were 'in performing but my duty to you: when you bethink yourself of a more convenient means to conserve your honour amongst these people, then that which your honour gave me in my instructions at my going away'. He considered his loyalty to Leicester his primary one, allowing him even to disobey the orders of the queen's commander in the Netherlands if they proved contradictory. He also lamented that 'I have not sithen my coming over heard from your lordship'. Instead, he complained 'that my Lord Willoughby told me, of his direction from your honour, I beseke you I may understand your pleasure by this bearer my servant whom I send over of purpose because he should returne to me with spede and deliver to me your mind in safety'.²⁰⁸ He added in his letter that 'I am not sorry though my Lord Willoughby be angry with me', since he considered that the main reason for this anger was his determination to continue to follow Leicester's orders. Leicester's favour of Christopher was neither guaranteed nor given freely: the patron

²⁰⁶ TNA SP84/24, f.108.

²⁰⁷ BL Cotton Galba D/III, f.199.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., f.201.

expected service in return. Equally, it was strong even in the face of competing loyalties to the queen and her officers.

There were considerable tensions when Willoughby first arrived in the Netherlands and attempted to assert his control over Leicester's men, due to the existing patronage networks. In September 1588, shortly after the Earl's death, Christopher wrote to Willoughby to apologise for 'my untowardly corse taken with you at my first entry into thes partes', which he assured him was down only to a direction from 'him whom I felt myself most affected unto', who can only mean the Earl of Leicester.²⁰⁹ It was only with Leicester's death that he felt able to commit himself to Willoughby. This was almost certainly caused by the loss of Leicester's patronage and Christopher's need to establish a new patronage network to support his position in the Netherlands. As late as December 1588, there was still a dispute over who was liable to pay Christopher's company.²¹⁰ In January 1589 it was proposed by Walsingham that Christopher be sent on an expedition to Portugal from Utrecht.²¹¹ However, by March, his horseband had been discharged.²¹² He returned to England and evidently hoped to return to the Netherlands that summer but, by July his service abroad was expressly ruled out, with Lord Burghley writing in his rough notes that 'Sir Christopher Blount is not to go'.²¹³ His lack of ability to find a place in the army in the Netherlands after 1588 may be linked to the death of the Earl of Leicester. Leicester's followers would naturally transfer their loyalties to his stepson, the Earl of Essex, who was effectively his political heir, although in Christopher's case this continuing patronage was by no means guaranteed due to his scandalous marriage with Leicester's widow. Her son, Essex, although later reconciled to the

²⁰⁹ *Manuscripts of the Earl of Ancaster*, 226.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 233.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 246.

²¹² TNA SP84/31, f.121.

²¹³ TNA SP84/33, f.159.

union, referred to it initially as an ‘unhappy choyse’ and an ‘ill match’.²¹⁴ It is impossible to view Christopher’s service in the Netherlands without also considering the retinue of the Earl of Leicester. His later service in Ireland also shows evidence of the continuance of the retinue system.

War in Ireland

The major conflict of Elizabeth’s reign was Ireland, a kingdom over which English control had been disintegrating since the time of Henry VIII, particularly following attempts to impose the Reformation.²¹⁵ By August 1580, what had once been a series of dynastic rebellions there had become a ‘quarrel upon religion’, with the kingdom frequently in revolt.²¹⁶ The Earl of Tyrone emerged as the Irish leader from 1593 and provided a common cause for the Gaelic and Anglo-Irish (who had occupied Ireland since the twelfth century), portraying Catholicism and nationality as inseparable and stating in September 1595 that his central aim was the restoration of Catholicism.²¹⁷ Some of the English, for their part, equated Catholicism in Ireland with treason.²¹⁸ The view that Ireland was a religious war was not universally held, however, with Sir George Carew, who was stationed in Ireland, considering in 1590 that the Irish would take the part with the strongest, rather than merely on religious

²¹⁴ BL Lansdowne MS 62, f.78.

²¹⁵ McGurk, *Elizabethan Conquest of Ireland*, 4, 15; Hiram Morgan, *Tyrone’s Rebellion* (Woodbridge, 1999), 3, 88; Brendan Bradshaw, ‘The English Reformation and identity formation in Ireland and Wales’ in Brendan Bradshaw and Peter Roberts (eds.), *British Consciousness and Identity* (Cambridge, 1998), 49; M. Caball, ‘Faith, culture and sovereignty: Irish nationality and its development, 1558-1625’ in Bradshaw and Roberts, *British Consciousness and Identity*, 131-132; Cyril Falls, *Elizabeth’s Irish Wars* (London, 1950), 19.

²¹⁶ Bradshaw, ‘English Reformation’, 65.

²¹⁷ Bradshaw, ‘English Reformation’, 64; Caball, ‘Faith, culture and sovereignty’, 131-2; Robert Dudley Edwards, *Church and State in Tudor Ireland* (Dublin, 1935), 282-3; Falls, *Elizabeth’s Irish Wars*, 19; Alan Ford, *The Protestant Reformation in Ireland, 1590-1641* (Frankfurt, 1985), 16; John McGurk, ‘The Recruitment and Transportation of Elizabethan Troops and their Service in Ireland, 1594-1603’ (University of Liverpool, PhD thesis, 1982), 5; McGurk, *Elizabethan Conquest of Ireland*, 21; Morgan, *Tyrone’s Rebellion*, 215.

²¹⁸ ‘The True Reporte of the Prosperous Successe...’ in Randall, *Military News Pamphlets*, 74.

lines.²¹⁹ In response to increasing difficulties, the English government began sending more troops to Ireland in the latter years of Elizabeth's reign.²²⁰ The requirements for new recruits were massive, with 1300 footmen sent over in early 1590, for example.²²¹ By February 1591, the queen was expending £29,700 a year towards her army in Ireland.²²² In recruitment for the Irish wars, a range of systems were used, including the militia, retinues and conscription.²²³

By January 1599 it had been decided that the Earl of Essex (who had volunteered to do so) would serve in Ireland. It was widely recognised that he would recruit his officers through his patronage networks, with these men drawn from his 'followers' or 'creatures' as some contemporaries put it.²²⁴ The actual troops were largely raised through the militia system, as previous armies for Ireland in the 1590s had also been recruited.²²⁵ Given the sheer demand for troops, this is unsurprising. Essex required 17,000 men at an estimated cost of more than £277,782 a year – a huge number of men which could only be drawn from the militia and which shows the increasing administrative abilities of the localities to meet the central government's demands.²²⁶ However, Ireland is rather a special case, since it was the defence of part of the queen's sovereign territory rather than a foreign war and, as such, should be viewed within the context of the defence of the realm rather than as a foreign invasion, something for which the militia had always been used.²²⁷ Volunteers also joined the army.²²⁸

²¹⁹ *Calendar of the Carew Manuscripts, Preserved in the Archiepiscopal Library at Lambeth 1589-1600*, vol 3, eds. J.S.Brewer and William Bullen (eds.) (London, 1869), 49.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 13, 133, 177; Rapple, *Martial Power*, 146.

²²¹ *Carew Manuscripts*, 71.

²²² *Ibid.*, 107.

²²³ Fissel, *English Warfare*, 89.

²²⁴ TNA SP12/270, f.27; *Letters Written by John Chamberlain during the Reign of Queen Elizabeth*, ed. Sarah Williams (Camden Society, 1861), X.

²²⁵ McGurk, *Elizabethan Conquest of Ireland*, 30.

²²⁶ *Carew Manuscripts*, 292; McGurk, *Elizabethan Conquest of Ireland*, 262.

²²⁷ S. Ellis, 'Crown, community and government in the English territories, 1450-1575' *History*, 71 (1986), 204.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

There was also some conflict as to whom, exactly, the troops were serving. While the queen outlaid the troops' pay, it was Essex who commanded them.²²⁹ He was criticised for making 59 knights in Ireland by August 1599: arguably, Essex was using knighthood as a further means of binding the troops to him, something that had also long occurred under the retinue system.²³⁰ The retinue system can also be seen in the selection of the commanders, as illustrated by Sir Christopher Blount and others.

Christopher Blount married Essex's mother in 1588, with the stepfather writing to his stepson to offer the use of 'my sword (which is ever at your command)'.²³¹ As the inheritor of Leicester's patronage networks, it is unsurprising that Essex also inherited Christopher's loyalty, particularly with the additional family tie of Christopher's marriage to his mother. Christopher frequently served with Essex, for example commanding a regiment of 1000 men as colonel during his stepson's expedition to Cadiz in 1596.²³² It was also Essex who arranged his appointment in March 1599 as a marshal of the queen's army in Ireland although, at the same time, Elizabeth refused the Earl's request to make Christopher a member of the Council of Ireland. This shows something of the extent to which Essex believed he could use patronage in Ireland, as well as the limits placed on his power. The Earl was furious, writing to the Council from Bromley on 1 April 1599 that 'I have returned Sir Christopher Blount, whom I hoped to have carried over; for I shall have no such necessary use of his hand, as, being barred the use of his head, I would carry him to his own disadvantage, and the disgrace of the place he should serve in'.²³³ The council replied the

²²⁹ *Letters by John Chamberlain*, ed. Williams, XX.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, XXIV.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, XXIV; *Calendar of the Cecil Papers in Hatfield House, vol 14: Addenda*, ed. E. Salisbury (London, 1923), 84.

²³² APC 25, 351-2; *Calendar of the Cecil Papers in Hatfield House, vol 6, 1596*, ed. R.A. Roberts (London, 1895), 361; *CSP, Domestic: Elizabeth, 1595-1597*, 104.

²³³ TNA SP63/205, f.3.

following day that the queen was displeased at Blount's return, since she agreed with his sufficiency to act as marshal of the army, but that 'she had already told Essex how much she thought Blount to blame, to forget her favour in thinking him worthy of that place, in such a time and in such an army, because he has not also the place of a Councillor of State'.²³⁴

The queen's disapproval of Blount perhaps stemmed from his socially unequal marriage to the Countess of Leicester (whom Elizabeth disliked), since his previous service in the Netherlands had been otherwise good and he was, at that stage, still professing loyalty to the Protestant church (see chapter 6). Christopher's lowly social status is also probably a factor. On 5 April Essex replied regarding his stepfather that 'first, for mine own excuse, I did find a lack, and so shall, if, going to manage a difficult war, and to govern an undisciplined dissolute army, and to consult with a Council to whom Her Majesty imputeth the loss almost of a kingdom, I have not one able assistant'.²³⁵ He informed them that he relied on Christopher's council who 'can be no strong assistant to me, being excluded from Council'. Matters were still not resolved when Essex pushed his stepfather's candidacy again from Dublin on 28 April 1599, although he had by then permitted Christopher to join him there as marshal.²³⁶ He feared, he wrote, 'such prejudice that may growe to her majesty's service' if Christopher as marshal was not also confirmed as a councillor as his predecessors had been. By 8 May even the council had come round to Essex's view, urging the queen to accept Christopher, but she refused, with the council recording that it 'be a thing fixed in her majesty's mynd, because she had denyed it to your selfe than that she doth not very well approve the gentleman's sufficiency to do her service'.²³⁷ In this sense, Christopher's

²³⁴ TNA SP63/204, f.147.

²³⁵ TNA SP63/205, f.19.

²³⁶ Ibid., f.54.

²³⁷ Ibid., f.77.

association with Essex arguably harmed his career, although the queen did eventually agree that he could attend council meetings unofficially in Ireland. Christopher Blount was a very obvious sign of the power struggle between the queen and her commander during the Irish campaign. The lengths that Essex was prepared to go to for Christopher also highlights once again the reciprocal nature of patronage networks. In this case, Essex was prepared to disobey the queen on his client's behalf, in order to obtain his military expertise. As with the earlier periods, the patronage network was still expressed primarily in military terms, although the ties and relationship between Essex and Christopher was considerably wider than this. There is no doubt that Christopher owed his position to patronage and, thus, the retinue system – he prioritised his loyalty to Essex over that towards his kinsman, Lord Mountjoy, in 1599, when the latter arrived in Ireland (with Christopher's brother in his household), in order to replace Essex as Lord Deputy. According to Sir John Poley, who was a relative of Christopher's and also served with Essex, from the first, Christopher and others showed a design 'to defeat the success of Lord Mountjoy's government in Ireland, in the interest of the Earl of Essex'.²³⁸ Essex's campaign was, in any event, unsuccessful and directionless.²³⁹ Christopher Blount was injured during the first months of the campaign and spent much of his time recuperating in Dublin.²⁴⁰

In August 1598 Richard Blount of Mapledurham in Oxfordshire, who was a distant Blount cousin and a Catholic, was reported to the Privy Council for refusing to supply funds for horses to be sent to Ireland.²⁴¹ This could be due more to a disinclination to make a financial

²³⁸ 'The Manuscripts of the Most Honourable Marquis of Bute, at Eccleston Square', *Third Report of the Royal Commission of Historical Manuscripts* (London, 1872), 203.

²³⁹ *Carew Manuscripts*, 304, 305, 306.

²⁴⁰ *Calendar of State Papers, Ireland, 1599-1600*, ed. Ernest George Atkinson (London, 1899) [hereafter *CSP, Ireland, 1599-1600*], 68, 140.

²⁴¹ *Acts of the Privy Council of England, vol 29, 1598-1599*, ed. John Roche Dasent (London, 1905), 29.

contribution in this way, but religious objections are also worth exploring. Certainly, the religion of Christopher's brother, Sir Edward Blount of Kidderminster, proved a major problem when he sailed for Ireland with his cousin, Lord Mountjoy, when he was appointed as Lord Deputy of Ireland in 1599.²⁴² Robert Cecil evidently objected to the appointment, since Mountjoy wrote in February 1600 to assure him that Edward came only to oversee his 'domestical affairs', something which suggests that he was considered not to be appropriate to join the army there.²⁴³ Mountjoy, in defending his cousin, informed Cecil that he was not a recusant and was, instead, a Justice of the Peace in Worcestershire 'though, I think, somewhat affected to the other religion'.²⁴⁴ Mountjoy evidently considered Edward to be a church papist, but his religion proved to be a major issue for his time in Ireland. In April, Mountjoy wrote again to Cecil, defending his cousin as 'a true, honest man, a good fellow [i.e. good man] papist, and as I think as much or more my friend than he is to any'.²⁴⁵ In the face of government pressure, Mountjoy returned Edward to England later that month, ostensibly to oversee the supply of horses for the Irish war.²⁴⁶ This hostility towards English Catholics going to Ireland can be understood within the context of the Irish rebels' links to Spain – further identifying the conflict as a religious war. In 1601, for example, 3400 Spanish troops landed in Kinsale in Ireland, where they were defeated by Lord Mountjoy.²⁴⁷ There clearly was concern in the English government about sending Catholics to Ireland, while Catholics themselves may also not have wished to support this war. However, the fact that Lord Mountjoy was prepared to take Sir Edward Blount and so vocally vouch for him makes it clear that the loyalty that existed between a patron and client or, to use terminology more

²⁴² *Calendar of State Papers, Ireland, 1600*, ed. Ernest George Atkinson (London, 1903) [hereafter *CSP, Ireland, 1600*], 91; Falls, *Mountjoy*, 236; F.M. Jones, *Mountjoy 1563-1606: The Last Elizabethan Deputy* (Dublin, 1988), 87.

²⁴³ *CSP, Ireland, 1599-1600*, 128.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁵ *CSP, Ireland 1600*, 91.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 105.

²⁴⁷ 'A Letter from a Souldier of Good Place in Ireland' in Randall, *Military News Pamphlets*.

usually applied to the medieval period, the retainer and the retained, could override religious loyalties. It could also, as shown above in relation to Sir Christopher Blount, override the loyalty owed to the crown.

Conclusion

As members of the country gentry, the Blounts were both patrons and clients in the Tudor period, and the retainers and the retained in the medieval period. Despite the differences in terminology, there was a strong resemblance between these roles. This was standard in both periods: patronage was everywhere and a fundamental part of the political system. The sixteenth century saw considerable changes to the way that such relationships functioned, with the monarch, in particular, establishing their own direct links to the gentry in some cases. However, throughout the late medieval period and the sixteenth century, the Blounts relied on intermediary tiers in the patronage networks. If Humphrey Blount of Kinlet, in the mid-fifteenth century, sought royal local office, he obtained it through the mediation of his patron, Lord Dudley, yet that patronage still ultimately came from the king. Sir John Blount of Kinlet, too, in soliciting Cromwell's assistance in 1530, ultimately sought the king's protection. Walter Blount of Astley, in the 1590s, petitioned Robert Cecil for aid, but, again, the ultimate source of this patronage was the queen. There was nothing new in these relationships and the methods that the men employed to gain preferment: patronage and intercession had, since at least the fourteenth century, been essential to the gentry. There is no doubt that the rise of the privy chamber under Henry VIII and that monarch's greater desire for privacy introduced a new layer, but the essential network remained the same: the king was the ultimate source of all preferment.

The experience of the Blounts suggests that patronage, too, remained important in the military, albeit that the militia system grew considerably in importance in relation to the raising of troops in the period. At the same time, the Blounts show that patronage could be a stronger motivation for going to war than religion, as the involvement of family members in the conflicts in the Netherlands and Ireland attest. There were many reasons why a man might go to war – not least because his patron decreed that he should. The medieval indenture system, as used by Lord Hastings in relation to Hugh Peshall, made it clear that the retainer was expected to follow their lord when required. Similarly, when the Earl of Leicester sent out his letters to his 200 ‘servants’ and ‘friends’ to ask them to ready themselves to serve with him in 1585, he did not ask for their consent to the motives behind his action. He expected them to obey his summons as, indeed, it appears that they did.

War was very much central to the lives of late medieval and early modern individuals: both as part of their self-image and in the reality of the regular demands for troops. As the examples above show, it is impossible to present a comprehensive study of either political or family culture in the period without also considering the military. Even in the face of Elizabeth’s perennial reluctance to go to war, the military pervaded society at all levels, while success in war was considered an essential part in what made a king great.²⁴⁸ It was central, too, to the self-image of country gentlemen, such as the Blounts of Kinlet, in spite of the relative rarity with which most of them fought.

²⁴⁸ Fissel, *English Warfare*, 4; Gunn, *English People at War*, 1.

Chapter 5: Religious Devotion in the Period up to 1558

The English Reformation has proved to be a difficult concept to understand and define, with scholarly debate wide and passionate. The sixteenth century was a time of significant religious change, with the period up to the creation of the Elizabethan settlement in 1559 one of considerable innovation and uncertainty. The period after 1559 was one of consolidation and implementation with regards to that settlement, but there remained uncertainties, conflicts and disputed religious identities. As such, there was considerable alteration to the faith of the state and the way that many (but not all) worshipped. The analysis of the Blount family's religious activities is divided into two chapters to reflect the changing religio-political climate, with the first ending in 1558.

Religion was a central feature of sixteenth-century life – everyone participated in the rites and activities of the church.¹ In this certainty, there is also a dilemma since ‘how could radically divisive ideologies have developed so swiftly within an intellectual framework so fundamental to contemporary society?’² How, why and when such a change in belief occurred are central questions, but it is also necessary to consider further, less obvious aspects. Was there a widespread and dramatic alteration in belief or can adherence to the new religious laws of the period be viewed as merely conformity?³ The debate is far from

¹ Marshall, *Heretics and Believers*, xi; Doreen Rosman, *The Evolution of the English Churches 1500-2000* (Cambridge, 2003), 12; Shagan, *Popular Politics*, 1; Lori Ann Ferrell and David Cressy (eds.), *Religion and Society in Early Modern England* (New York, 1996), 15.

² Shagan, *Popular Politics*, 1.

³ See, for example, Haigh, ‘The Church of England, the Catholics and the People’, who argues that the legislative Reformation was distinct to the considerably slower paced popular Reformation. Also, see Christopher Haigh, ‘The recent historiography of the English Reformation’, *Historical Journal*, 25 (1982), 995-1007; David Palliser, ‘Popular Reactions to the Reformation during the Years of Uncertainty 1530-70’ in Felicity Heal and Rosemary O’Day, *Church and Society in England: Henry VIII to James I* (1977), 35-56; Ferrell and Cressy, *Religion and Society*, 19.

reaching a consensus. The political changes are clear: moving from the break with Rome and Henry VIII's assumption of the headship of the Church of England in the 1530s, to the Protestantism of Edward VI's reign and the Catholicism of Mary's, but what of the experience of the people of England themselves?

The once traditional view of the Reformation was that by 1547 Protestantism was widely established as the faith of the English people.⁴ This view has changed. For revisionist historians, few can be considered to have actively converted to Protestantism in the first half of the sixteenth century.⁵ Indeed, it is considered that, far from being a decaying institution, the medieval church was in large part popular and dynamic.⁶ Bernard, who considers the medieval church to have been, fundamentally, a monarchical church under crown control, modified this picture of dynamism to some extent with his recognition of vulnerability in some aspects of the late medieval church, but shows too that there was also considerable vitality.⁷ Scholars now tend to consider the Reformation and Protestantism to have been only slowly accepted in England and largely unlooked for, instead, being driven by political pressure.⁸ More recently some historians have begun to reject the notion that the Reformation

⁴ Dickens, 'The Early Expansion of Protestantism', 87; Heath, *English Parish Clergy*, 187; Tyacke, 'Re-Thinking the "English Reformation"', 7-11; Whiting, *Blind Devotion*, 151;

⁵ Patrick Collinson, 'Comment on Eamon Duffy's Neale Lecture and the Colloquium' in Tyacke, *England's Long Reformation*, 71-86; Haigh, 'Recent historiography', 995-1007; Haigh, Church of England, the Catholics and the People', 196; Christopher Marsh, 'Piety and persuasion in Elizabethan England: The Church of England meets the family of love' in Tyacke, *England's Long Reformation*, 142; Christopher Marsh, *Popular Religion in Sixteenth-Century England* (Houndmills, 1998), 28; Palliser, 'Popular Reactions to the Reformation', 35-56; J.J. Scarisbrick, *Reformation and the English People* (Oxford, 1984), 1; Shagan, *Popular Politics*, 6; R.N. Swanson, *Church and Society in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 1993), 312; Ferrell and Cressy, *Religion and Society*, 19.

⁶ Bernard, *Late Medieval English Church*, ix; Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 4; Beat Kumin, *The Shaping of a Community: The Rise and Reformation of the English Parish c.1400-1560* (Aldershot, 1996), 6; Marsh, 'Piety and persuasion', 141-165; Marshall and Ryrie, 'Protestantisms and their Beginnings', 2-3; Ryrie, 'Counting Sheep', 98; Scarisbrick, *Reformation and the English People*, 1; Swanson, *Church and Society*, 1, 307; Whiting, *Blind Devotion*, 3.

⁷ Bernard, *Late Medieval English Church*.

⁸ Ryrie, 'Counting Sheep', 84; Whiting, *Blind Devotion*, 1; Ferrell and Cressy, *Religion and Society*, 19.

even focussed on religious conversion.⁹ This leads to an alternative emphasis on conformity, where individuals who did not undergo a religious conversion nonetheless acted in ways at odds with previous behaviour.¹⁰ An alternative view, which has been advanced by Lori Ferrell and David Cressy, is that many traditionalists perceived only limited challenges to fundamental beliefs or modes of worship, with devotion in the parish churches remaining largely unchanged in the period up to 1547.¹¹ 'The Reformation is viewed as a long process, with a 'gradual inculturation' leading to the adoption of Protestantism rather than rapid conversion.'¹² Indeed, Christopher Haigh has gone so far as to argue that 'under the tutelage of conservative clergy, the beliefs of the laity may have changed very little in the reign of Elizabeth', albeit that it is acknowledged that, with a lack of access to Catholic priests and therefore sacraments in the latter part of the reign, there was considerable 'leakage' from the English Catholic community.¹³

The terms 'Protestant' and 'Catholic' are highly problematic in the early Reformation period.¹⁴ 'Protestantism' was only slowly adopted by those who would now be described as Protestant in England and only began to appear as a term more frequently from the 1560s onwards.¹⁵ It is however necessary for historians to apply some labels. Evangelical is an alternative, but this also is not without its problems.¹⁶ Similarly 'Reformers', while on the

⁹ Eamon Duffy, 'The Long Reformation: Catholicism, Protestantism and the Multitude' in Tyacke, *England's Long Reformation*, 36; Marshall and Ryrie, 'Protestantisms and their Beginnings', 3; Ryrie, 'Counting Sheep', 98; Shagan, *Popular Politics*, 6.

¹⁰ Shagan, *Popular Politics*, 6.

¹¹ Ferrell and Cressy, *Religion and Society*, 19.

¹² Haigh, Church of England, the Catholics and the People', 196; Marshall and Ryrie, 'Protestantisms and their Beginnings', 3; Diarmaid MacCulloch, 'Review: The Impact of the English Reformation', *Historical Journal*, 38 (1995).

¹³ Haigh, Church of England, the Catholics and the People', 199.

¹⁴ Marshall, 'Naming of Protestant England', 89; Bossy, *Some Elementary Forms*, 17 considers that 'words matter; that without a sense of their history they become manipulative in the cause of obfuscation'.

¹⁵ Marshall and Ryrie, 'Protestantisms and their Beginnings', 5; Marshall, 'Naming of Protestant England', 96.

¹⁶ Dowling, *Humanism*, 121; Marshall, 'Naming of Protestant England', 92.

face of it applicable to this group before 1558, is also problematic as a category, since an interest in reform could be universal. The term ‘Catholic’ should be treated with even more caution, particularly in relation to the pre-Reformation church. The term – which was claimed by all sides of the religious debate - referred to the universal church and features in the Creed.¹⁷ In the 1540s and 1550s, there was no certainty that ‘Catholic’ would come to be identified with those who could be considered to hold (or would develop) traditional beliefs.¹⁸ Such a dispute over terminology highlights the unsettled nature of religious divisions, which were often a matter of self-definition.¹⁹ Up until at least the 1540s it is arguable that the Reformation was still looked at in terms of schism rather than religious change, something which helps account for the fluidity of terminologies.²⁰ Even Henry VIII’s faith is far from agreed upon.²¹

It is also important to consider Christian Humanism, which influenced both sides of the religious divide and was a crucial influence in much of Henry VIII’s church reform.²²

Humanism, as a movement, defies easy definition.²³ It can be defined narrowly as a scholarly

¹⁷ Peter Marshall, *Religious Identities in Henry VIII’s England* (London, 2005), 22-48; Marshall and Ryrie, ‘Protestantisms and their Beginnings’, 5; Ethan Shagan, ‘Introduction: English Catholic History in Context’ in Ethan Shagan (ed.), *Catholics and the ‘Protestant Nation’: Religious Politics and Identity in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 2005), 2.

¹⁸ Peter Marshall, ‘Papist as heretic: the burning of John Forest, 1538’, *The Historical Journal*, 41, no.2 (1998), 352 notes the use of Catholic in terms distinct from the Roman Catholic Church in the 1538 charges against John Forest.

¹⁹ Wooding, *Rethinking Catholicism*, 4.

²⁰ Marshall and Ryrie, ‘Protestantisms and their Beginnings’, 6; O’Grady, *Conforming Catholics*, 120.

²¹ O’Grady, *Conforming Catholics*, 10.

²² George Bernard, ‘The piety of Henry VIII’ in N.S. Amos, A. Pettegree and H. Van Nierop (eds.), *The Education of a Christian Society* (Aldershot, 1999), 87; O’Grady, *Conforming Catholics*, 68; Richard Rex, ‘The role of English Humanists in the Reformation up to 1559’ in Amos, Pettegree and Van Nierop, *Education of a Christian Society*, 31; Wooding, *Rethinking Catholicism*, 29.

²³ Ian Green, *Humanism and Protestantism in Early Modern English Education* (Farnham, 2009), 10. Similarly, James McConica, ‘Erasmus and the “Julius”: A Humanist Reflects on the Church’ in C. Trinkaus and H.A. Oberman (eds.), *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion* (1974), 444-471 refers to Erasmus with the comment that ‘it is not so much the content of his ideas as the way in which they take flight’.

discipline.²⁴ Alternatively, a wider approach has been adopted, looking at attempts to simplify doctrine and reform religious practice.²⁵ Here, it will be considered an intellectual movement, providing scholars with a new set of academic tools – allowing them to look at the world and think in a different way.²⁶ It was a philosophical movement, but there is no consensus about its exact aims or ideas.²⁷ Christian Humanism is of special relevance to the Blounts, due to their kinship with William Blount, Lord Mountjoy, a leading proponent of the movement in England, as well as their more distant familial relationship with the scholar, Richard Croke.²⁸

In order to answer the questions posed in this chapter and to provide an analysis of the Blount family's religious devotion in the period, the evidence for the family's religious activities in the pre-Reformation period will be considered, including an analysis of their links to monasticism and the surviving pre-Reformation fabric in the churches they were associated with. The family's links to Christian Humanism will be scrutinized, before the evidence for changing beliefs in the Reformation period (up to 1558) are discussed. It is intended to show, through an analysis of wills, monuments and the acquisition of monastic property, amongst other evidence, that the family did indeed respond to and involve themselves in the political

²⁴ P. Burke, 'The Spread of Italian Humanism' in Anthony Goodman and Angus McKay (eds.), *The Impact of Humanism on Western Europe* (London, 1990), 2; P.O. Kristeller, 'The Rise of Religion in Renaissance Humanism and Platonism' in Trinkaus and Oberman, *The Pursuit of Holiness*, 368.

²⁵ McConica, *English Humanists*, 2.

²⁶ Laurence Brockliss, R. Darwall-Smith, D. Skinner and C. Ferdinand, 'The New College, 1486-1558' in Laurence Brockliss (ed.), *Magdalen College Oxford: A History* (Oxford, 2008), 48; McConica, *English Humanists*, 44; K. Tilmans, 'From institutio to educatio: the origin of political education in the Habsburg Netherlands' in Amos, Pettegree and Van Nierop, *Education of a Christian Society*, 41.

²⁷ Wooding, *Rethinking Catholicism*, 22; Leon Halkin, *Erasmus: A Critical Biography* (Oxford, 1994), 13; Dowling, *Humanism*, 1; Green, *Humanism and Protestantism*, 11; Richard Rex, *The Theology of John Fisher* (Cambridge, 1991), 50.

²⁸ Croke was a distant cousin of the Blounts (Croke, *Genealogical History*). He became Reader in Greek at Cambridge in 1518 (McConica, *English Humanists*, 80). He later tutored Thomas Blount's great-grandson, Henry Fitzroy, and his grandsons: George, Henry and William Blount of Kinlet. Lord Mountjoy was Erasmus' leading English patron (Halkin, *Erasmus*, 30; McConica, *English Humanists*, 6).

and social changes of the Reformation, but that this, in itself, is not indicative of a change in religious beliefs.

The Pre-Reformation Period

Surviving evidence suggests that the late medieval generations of Blounts were involved in church life. Parish registers from Astley in Worcestershire, which survive from 1539, suggest that the Astley Blounts played a part in worship in the parish church throughout the Reformation period. Although there were no family baptisms between 1539 and 1563, this was likely due to the ages of Walter Blount and his wife, Isabel, both of whom were in their late forties or fifties in 1539. The couple's daughters married in the church (Elizabeth and Meredith in 1544 and Hannah in 1563) and Walter and his wife were buried there. No early registers survive for Kinlet, although Walter Blount's sister, Anne, was married by bishop's licence in the church in 1511, demonstrating that the family made use of their local church.²⁹

For earlier generations, the evidence is patchy but interesting. Walter Blount of Astley's grandfather, Sir Humphrey Blount of Kinlet and his wife were buried in Kinlet Church – something which Humphrey requested in his will of 1477. A writ sworn by Humphrey in January 1444 also confirms that he was baptised in Kinlet Parish Church on the day of his birth on 25 November 1422.³⁰ The writ, which was intended to prove that Humphrey had reached his majority, went into considerable detail about the baptism, including witnesses. He had three godparents – a neighbouring gentleman, the parson of Broughton and the Countess of Warwick, all of whom attended the baptism and 'drank in the church'. Servants of the

²⁹ *The Register of Richard Mayew, Bishop of Hereford (1504-1516)*, ed. Anthony Thomas Bannister (Hereford, 1919), 103.

³⁰ *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem*, vol 26, 196.

family attended, with one recalling in 1444 that he had been bitten during the ceremony by the Countess's greyhound. Two wax torches were burnt near the font, while another family servant brought bread and two silver pots full of sweet wine into the church for the ceremony. Another servant filled the font with water and a further servant went to a house next to the church to use their fire to light torches. At the same time as the baptism a female servant of a neighbour, Clement Draper, was married in the church. The writ also refers to preparations made for the churching of Humphrey's mother, Alice, with red wine purchased for the occasion. The document goes into considerable detail and gives the impression of a community centred on the parish church and church ceremony, with all levels of society in Kinlet attending the baptism. Surviving household accounts for Humphrey's godmother, Elizabeth Berkeley, Countess of Warwick, also provide evidence of communal religious life.³¹ The Countess regularly received visits from ecclesiastics, such as a canon of Hereford Cathedral and friars from Bristol, Worcester and Droitwich. It was her habit to invite the local parish priest and often also the parish clerk to dine with her on a Sunday wherever she was staying.³²

The fabric of parish churches can also indicate a thriving belief-system.³³ Lavish spending on tombs has similarly been identified as a marker of the strength of traditional faith due to the connection of such monuments, as intercessory objects, to the doctrine of Purgatory.³⁴ Kinlet Church includes tombs, a side chapel and stained glass, all dating to the late medieval period. The tomb of Sir Humphrey Blount and his wife was probably commissioned by their son, Thomas, in the early sixteenth century. It is an alabaster altar tomb with recumbent effigies of

³¹ 'The Household Accounts of Elizabeth Berkeley, Countess of Warwick, 1420-1', ed. C.D. Ross, *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, 70 (1951), 87-89.

³² *Ibid.*, 94.

³³ Marshall, *Heretics and Believers*, 7; Whiting, *Blind Devotion*, 3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

the couple. Their children are depicted as weepers around the tomb chest, alongside the depiction of an angel and the Virgin Mary (images that highlight the fact that the tomb was produced in the pre-Reformation era). Aspects of pre-Reformation faith can also be glimpsed at Gnosall in Staffordshire, the home parish of Katherine Peshall, wife of Sir John Blount of Kinlet. The church there contained a small chapel in the north transept in the late perpendicular style.³⁵ Although now lost, in 1680 it was noted to contain coats of arms and stained glass which suggested that it was a Peshall family chapel. The north wall of the church also contains a recess - probably once an Easter sepulchre.³⁶ The Peshall manor of Knightley (in Gnosall parish) contained a now vanished chapel, whose graveyard at least was still in use up to 1606.³⁷ Another manor in the parish, Chatwell, too, contained a chapel, although this was destroyed during the Reformation.³⁸ There is no evidence of any decline in popular devotion in the pre-Reformation period at Kinlet or Gnosall.

Arguments that the late medieval church was in decline are often based on ideas that the clergy were considered inadequate, although there is no evidence for this in the late fifteenth century at Kinlet. From at least the early fourteenth century, the benefice at Kinlet was in the grant of the monastery at Wigmore.³⁹ Where they failed to supply a vicar, the bishop had the authority to make an appointment (a power exercised more than once in the medieval period).⁴⁰ Church patronage was both a spiritual right and an important property right of the patron in the early modern period, making the relationship between patron, parish and

³⁵ *Gnosall Parish Registers*, ed. Adams, iv.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, x.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, ix.

³⁹ *The Register of Thomas de Charlton Bishop of Hereford (AD 1327-1344)*, ed. W.W. Capes (Hereford, 1912), 77.

⁴⁰ *The Register of John de Trillek Bishop of Hereford (AD 1344-1361)*, ed. J.H. Parry (Hereford, 1910), 381.

appointee often a complex one.⁴¹ Wigmore Abbey was, however, the major religious house in the local area and one which had strong links to Kinlet, the neighbouring parish of Highley and the Blount family manor of Mamble in Worcestershire, which is six miles from Kinlet. Before the Reformation Wigmore Abbey paid a pension of 20s a year to the vicar of Highley – a considerable sum and one which helped maintain links between the parish and the abbey, who held the rights to the benefice.⁴² The church at Mamble was also in the grant of Wigmore Abbey, with strong links maintained between the two parishes. Thomas Rushbury was presented as vicar of Mamble by Wigmore priory on 6 February 1525.⁴³ He remained in office until 20 February 1532 when the priory moved him to Highley. On the same day they appointed Edward Rushbury to his kinsman's former living at Mamble, with both men still in their respective benefices in 1535.⁴⁴ The terms of the abbey's interest in the two parishes were different, with the church at Mamble required to pay 13s 4d a year to the abbot and convent of Wigmore, in contrast to the pension paid by the abbey to the incumbent at Highley, something that presumably made it the more desirable benefice.⁴⁵ There is nothing to suggest any decline in the abbey's authority in the parishes in the pre-Reformation period. With both Rushburys still in their respective churches in 1535, it appears as though life was very much business as usual at Highbury and Mamble on the eve of the Reformation and the dissolution of the monasteries. Indeed, in 1535 the Abbey was still actively looking to increase its income in the local area, renting land in Mamble from Thomas Blount of Sodington worth 2s a year and from Sir Edward Croft, a cousin of the Kinlet Blounts, worth 24s 8d.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Rosemary O'Day, 'The Law of Patronage in Early Modern England', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 26 (1975), 247-60.

⁴² *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, 203.

⁴³ *Registrum Caroli Bothe: Episcopi Herefordensis, AD 1516-1535*, vol 2, ed. Anthony Thomas Bannister (Hereford, 1921), 338.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 3, 46; *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, 211, 278.

⁴⁵ *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, 211.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 203.

The church was not a major landholder at Kinlet – in the 1489 royal subsidy the vicar was assessed to be liable for the lowest amount in the diocese of Hereford from amongst the religious houses and church benefices.⁴⁷ However, this figure disguises the fact that thanks to the wealth of the occupants of the parish, it was a comparatively wealthy benefice. In 1535 the church at Kinlet was estimated to be worth £8 2s 4d a year, just over £1 more than neighbouring Highley and the third most valuable church in Stottesdon Hundred.⁴⁸ Similar figures were also estimated the following year by the Bishop of Hereford.⁴⁹ Kinlet church received almost all its income from ‘glebe tenths and other diverse tenths’, with its income therefore based on taxation.⁵⁰ This can be contrasted with nearby Mamble. Here, the church benefice was worth £9 2s 10d a year, with the bulk of the church’s income coming from its lands and, also, the sale of lambs’ wool.⁵¹ While both parishes employed different methods by which the benefice was supported financially, there is no evidence of any decline in revenues, with both worth reasonably significant amounts and well able to support a vicar and the upkeep of the church.

Absenteeism (where a priest took the income from a benefice but did not carry out his duties there) has been suggested as a particular problem in the late medieval period.⁵² The vicars of Kinlet and Mamble were certainly resident, with both Alan Cliff and Roger Purslowe, the respective vicars during the late 1530s and 1540s, appearing regularly as witnesses in relation to Bills of Complaint in Star Chamber and the Chancery Courts relating to the manor. This

⁴⁷ *The Register of Thomas Myllyng Bishop of Hereford (1474-1492)*, ed. Anthony Thomas Bannister (Hereford, 1919), 121-3.

⁴⁸ *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, 210-211.

⁴⁹ *Registrum Caroli Bothe*, ed. Bannister, 369.

⁵⁰ *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, 210-211.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 278.

⁵² Heath, *English Parish Clergy*.

was not, however, the case everywhere. Lady Tailboys, whose son was soon to marry Elizabeth Blount of Kinlet, kept the rector of Grainsby in her household at Goltho in Lincolnshire in 1519.⁵³ This left Grainsby devoid of clergy although, since Goltho was only twenty-five miles away the rector could still have officiated on occasion. The rector's absence was obviously not considered too problematic to parish life since he is still recorded as holding the benefice seven years later in 1526. It is impossible to make generalisations about the religious activities of the communities in which the Blounts were involved in the pre-Reformation period. This is hardly surprising since it is impossible to separate religion from everyday life in sixteenth-century England, with a diversity of practice and responses to be expected across different parishes.⁵⁴

The picture that emerges of Kinlet in the fifteenth- and early sixteenth-centuries is of a community in which the parish church was central, in spite of the fact that the church was only a minor landowner there. The late medieval church has been argued to be best viewed through the prism of the 'parish community' and as 'the main point of reference for the analysis of everyday devotional and social life'.⁵⁵ This is particularly true of the Reformation period, since the abolition of monasticism meant that ministry was located primarily in the parish.⁵⁶ The evidence from Kinlet, although fairly sparse, would seem to support the picture of a late medieval church in no way in terminal decline. If anything, it appears as a vibrant part of the community.

⁵³ *Visitations in the Diocese of Lincoln 1517-1531 vol I: Visitations of Rural Deaneries by William Atwater, Bishop of Lincoln, and his Commissaries, 1517-1520*, ed. A.H. Thompson (The Lincoln Record Society, 1940), 87.

⁵⁴ Duffy, *Voices of Morebath*, 141.

⁵⁵ Kumin, *Shaping of a Community*, 2, 4.

⁵⁶ Duffy, 'Long Reformation', 36.

Although the beliefs of individuals are difficult to reconstruct, it is possible to understand something of the nature of worship in the immediate pre-Reformation period.⁵⁷ Agnes Blount of Kinlet, who was the fifth daughter of Sir John and Katherine Blount, married Richard Lacon of Willey in around 1520. While Willey had a chapel, it was dependent on Holy Trinity Church, Much Wenlock, and did not have the status of a full parish church.⁵⁸ Anne and Richard Lacon therefore had strong links to the church at Much Wenlock, which can be seen in the register of its vicar, Sir Thomas Boteler, which was kept from 1538 until 1562. Use of the register must be treated with caution, since it was destroyed in a fire in 1859. Substantial extracts, albeit not originally prepared for publication, have been published, however.⁵⁹ Boteler provided considerably more detail than most surviving parish registers, with the extracts comparable in detail with those kept by Sir Christopher Trychay at Morebath.⁶⁰ Boteler's registers, like Trychay's, are a highly significant source for the Reformation period.

Although the register begins in 1538, there are numerous references to earlier religious practices. Like Kinlet, Highley and Mamble, Much Wenlock was dominated by a religious house, with the prior of St Milburga's (or Wenlock) Priory appointing Boteler to his living, while the monks assisted in the services in the parish church. Throughout the period between 1538-1562 Boteler makes references to various priests, monks and servants of the Priory, including a porter, carpenter, sexton, cellarer, brewers, and an organ player. The Priory was

⁵⁷ W. Coster, 'Popular culture and the parish registers 1538-1603' in Katherine L. French, Gary G. Gibbs and Beat Kumin (eds.), *The Parish in English Life 1400-1600* (Manchester:1997), 94-114; Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 497-503; Marsh, *Popular Religion*, 4-7.

⁵⁸ *A History of the County of Shropshire*, volume 10, ed. C.R.J. Currie (Victoria County History, Oxford, 1998), 447-460.

⁵⁹ 'The Register of Sir Thomas Botelar, vicar of Much Wenlock', *Transactions of the Shropshire Historical and Archaeological Society*, 6 (1883), 93-132; 'Extracts from the Register of Sir Thomas Butler, Vicar of Much Wenlock, in Shropshire', ed. Charles Hartshorne, *The Cambrian Journal*, 4 (1861), 81-98.

⁶⁰ Duffy, *Voices of Morebath*.

of considerable importance to the town, with many of the people listed in Boteler's register having direct or indirect contact with the monastery. Entries in the Register also suggest that the Priory was a vibrant place up until its dissolution. One former monk, Sir William Corvehill, was buried in May 1546. Boteler noted that 'he was well skilled in Geometry not by Speculation but by Experience could make Organs, Clock and Chimes. In Kerving in Masonry and Silk Weaving and painting, & could make all Instruments of Musick & was a very patient & Gud Man borne in this Borowe somtyme Monk in the Monastery'. Boteler concluded that 'all this country had a great loss of Sir William for he was a good Bellfounder & Maker of the frames'.⁶¹ It is possible to construct a picture of worship in the parish church in the years leading up to the Reformation and up until the end of Henry VIII's reign. There are many references to music. The Priory's organ player, who was buried in Boteler's church, was 'an expert and full conyng man in Musicke and did set many a swete and sole'ne song to the lawde of Almyghty God'.⁶² Boteler also referred to John Chistoke, who died in September 1532, as 'a full honest server of the Churche and taught scolers playne song & prick song full well so that the churche was well served in his tyme'.⁶³ When placebo, dirige and mass were held for the burial of Elizabeth Monslow in November 1544, Boteler was assisted in the ceremony by four former monks, a further priest 'never monk' and the clerk of the church.⁶⁴ Boteler's Register shows a community dominated by the presence of a monastery, with many of the residents involved with the religious house in some way. They continued to be largely defined by this association in relation to their religious activities after the dissolution, showing that the monastery remained a popular and important part of daily life in the area.

⁶¹ 'Register of Sir Thomas Botelar', 118-119.

⁶² Ibid., 116.

⁶³ Hartshorne, 'Sir Thomas Butler', 87.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

The surviving pre-Reformation religious evidence relating to the Blounts demonstrates genuine belief, but no exceptional level of piety, something which would be expected amongst the population as a whole. As Duffy has identified, the late medieval church was a part of daily life, with religious devotion rarely displayed in an exceptional (and, thus, likely to survive in the sources) way by individuals. John and Katherine Blount of Kinlet showed just such a level of piety when, in around 1517, they paid for their names and the names of the nine children that they had produced (including those that were already deceased) to be added to a bede roll produced for the archdeaconry of Stafford while they were then living at Knightley in Staffordshire.⁶⁵ However, while this shows evidence of a belief in Purgatory and other tenets of traditional belief which would be expected of the time, there was nothing exceptional in this: 45,000 of their neighbours appear on the list. Also, although names continued to be added until at least 1532 or 1533, John and Katherine did not offer a further donation to add the names of their two youngest children after their births. They, like most of their peers, lived in a society that could not conceive of life without the church or religion: it was a part of daily life and in no way in decline.

Christian Humanism in the Pre-Reformation Period

There is also evidence that the Blounts had some interest in Christian Humanism in the immediate pre-Reformation period. The foundation of new colleges at Oxford and Cambridge gave interested members of the laity the opportunity of providing financial support for the movement, with the statutes of many seeking the humanist ideal of reformation of the secular

⁶⁵ *A List of Families in the Archdeaconry of Stafford, 1532-33*, ed. Ann J. Kettle (Staffordshire Record Society, 1976), 96. The date of the Blounts' entry is based on the birth dates of their children.

clergy.⁶⁶ Brasenose College, Oxford, is of particular relevance to the Blounts. It was founded by William Smyth, Bishop of Lincoln and Richard Sutton, a London barrister, in around January 1508.⁶⁷ Smyth had earlier shown an interest in education when, while Bishop of Lichfield, he converted a decayed house of friars into a grammar school in his diocese.⁶⁸ The ethos behind Brasenose's foundation has been much debated, with some historians viewing it as a centre of humanist learning, while it has more recently been asserted that it 'was little different in inspiration from earlier foundations'.⁶⁹ The decision to found a new college at Oxford early in the sixteenth century would have been taken within the context of humanism, even if it was not intended to overtly promulgate the philosophy, since humanist ideas had already begun to enter the mainstream in education.⁷⁰ Similarly, educational links between the overtly humanist Corpus Christi College and Brasenose suggest that the two colleges were not intended to stand in opposition to each other.⁷¹

The earliest cash donation made to Brasenose was the gift of £6 13s. 4d. in 1515/6 by Sir Thomas Blount of Kinlet – a not insubstantial sum given the fact that £100 was enough to endow a fellowship.⁷² Thomas was therefore an early supporter of the college, remaining so until his death, with his executors making a further gift in his name of £5 in 1525. There is no specific bequest to the college in Thomas's will and it is therefore highly likely that the gift

⁶⁶ McConica, *English Humanists*, 76, 78. The new colleges were Christ's and St John's (Cambridge) and Brasenose, Corpus Christi and Cardinal, later Christ Church, (Oxford).

⁶⁷ H.C. Maxwell Lyte, *A History of the University of Oxford from the Earliest Times to the Year 1530* (London, 1886), 397.

⁶⁸ I.S. Leadam, 'The Early Years of the College', *Brasenose College Quartercentenary Monographs*, vol 2 pt 1 (Oxford, 1909), 5.

⁶⁹ Brockliss, *et al*, 'New College', 49; Leadam, 'Early Years', 24; Erika Rummel, *The Humanist-Scholastic Debate* (Cambridge, 1998), 195; Margo Todd, *Christian Humanism and the Puritan Social Order* (Cambridge, 1987), 49.

⁷⁰ Ralph Churton, *The Lives of William Smyth Bishop of Lincoln and Sir Richard Sutton Knight, Founders of Brasen Nose College* (Oxford, 1800), 314; Dowling, *Humanism*, 11; Green, *Humanism and Protestantism*, 55.

⁷¹ Maxwell Lyte, *History of the University of Oxford*, 404; McConica, *English Humanists*, 82.

⁷² Leadam, 'Early Years', 135.

was made under the clause in the will which requested that his executors ‘order and dispose where need is for godds sake and for the wealth of my sowle as the said Edward Walter and Thomas [the executors] shall thynke most best’. It was evidently considered by the executors (who were, respectively, two of Thomas’s sons and the vicar of Kinlet) that a charitable bequest to the college was something of which Thomas would approve. Thomas Blount knew Bishop Smyth personally, with both holding official posts in the Welsh Marches and in the household of Prince Arthur at Ludlow early in the sixteenth century.⁷³ It would appear that Thomas’s interest in education was genuine and the evidence suggests a real interest in the foundation and, potentially, its aims to open up education to a wider range of people using humanist principles. Thomas certainly invested in the education of his eldest son, John, who was described as ‘a learned man’ in 1518.⁷⁴ Other evidence suggests his younger children and grandchildren were educated. His grandson – Thomas Blount of Kidderminster, who was the only grandchild named in his will – became a lawyer.⁷⁵ Thomas’s eldest grandchild, Elizabeth Blount of Kinlet, possessed a manuscript copy of Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, something which may suggest that she was familiar with Latin (since sections of this mostly English work are in Latin).⁷⁶ Handwritten notes to this and a second book (Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*) which also belonged to Elizabeth demonstrate that she was literate and familiar with the content of her books.⁷⁷

⁷³ *Receyt of the Ladie Kateryne*, ed. Kipling, 82-83, 86-93.

⁷⁴ TNA STAC5/570/28.

⁷⁵ Boyd, ‘Proceedings of the court of Star Chamber, Temp. Henry VIII and Edward VI’, 14.

⁷⁶ BL Egerton 1991.

⁷⁷ John Rylands Library 12005.

What Sir Thomas Blount's interest in education cannot give is an indication of his religious beliefs.⁷⁸ Humanism was not a faith.⁷⁹ What the movement did was to supply the intellectual foundations for religious change – across the entire spectrum of belief.⁸⁰ The evidence of Sir Thomas Blount is suggestive of humanist ideals permeating the country gentry in the early years of the sixteenth century.⁸¹ He cannot be said to have held anything other than traditional beliefs – such beliefs were not even seriously challenged in England before his death in 1524. An inscription in a now lost window at Stottesdon Church was recorded in the seventeenth century to have stated 'Pray for S'r Tho' Blount, Knight, and Dame Anne, his wife, which made this window in the yeare 1414'.⁸² The date is wrongly transcribed and should probably refer to 1514 – around the time that Thomas made his first gift to Brasenose. Clearly, Sir Thomas Blount of Kinlet considered in 1514 that he would benefit from prayers after his death, demonstrating a belief in the doctrine of Purgatory. However, in 1514, this was hardly surprising since the doctrine was not widely challenged until two decades later. Like his father before him, Thomas was involved in the administrative side of church life, playing a role in church appointments. In March 1507 he appointed a Walter Blount to the benefice at Ribesford – a right that had been granted to him by a distant relative by marriage, John Grey, Viscount Lisle.⁸³ Finally, in his highly detailed will, written before his death in 1524, Thomas declared that 'I bequeathe my Sowle to God and to our lady and to all the seynts in hevyn and my Body to be buried in Saint Kateryns chappell before the auter there'.⁸⁴ The use of will

⁷⁸ Green, *Humanism and Protestantism*, 347; Wooding, *Rethinking Catholicism*, 16.

⁷⁹ Bernard, 'The piety of Henry VIII', 85; P. Matheson, 'Humanism and Reform Movements' in Goodman and MacKay, *The Impact of Humanism*, 23; Rex, 'Role of English Humanists', 26-29; Wooding, *Rethinking Catholicism*, 27.

⁸⁰ Dowling, *Humanism*, 2; Matheson, 'Humanism and Reform Movements', 27; Wooding, *Rethinking Catholicism*, 16, 37.

⁸¹ Humanism has been described as a movement which 'tended to be an urban or courtly affair' (Matheson, 'Humanism and Reform Movements', 26).

⁸² W. Purton, 'Stottesdon Church', *The Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 24 (1868), 202-3.

⁸³ *Register of Richard Mayew. Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem, and other Analogous Documents Preserved in the Public Record Office, Henry VII*, Vol 2 (London, 1915), 895.

⁸⁴ Shropshire Archives 3320/62/7.

preambles as a statement of faith is problematic. Attempts have long been made to use them as markers of Catholic or Protestant faith, although it cannot be presumed that all conform to the beliefs of the testator, or were even drafted or approved by them.⁸⁵ The evidence suggests that will preambles can be useful indicators for the faith of some individuals but that this will only be the case for the small number showing very clear detail of religious belief.⁸⁶ There is nothing controversial about Thomas Blount's own preamble. It is brief but couched in traditional language, with a focus on God, the Virgin and the saints. Thomas also employed the vicar of Kinlet, Thomas Mason, as one of his executors, as well as leaving sums for a tomb memorial (which his eldest son neglected to arrange).

The Kinlet branch of the family also had access to a number of early English printed books due to their kinship with John Russhe (d.1499), a London merchant, who was married to Isabel Stanley, the mother of Sir Thomas Blount's daughter-in-law. The two families remained closely linked, with Isabel depositing some gold chains with Thomas for safekeeping, for example, as well as leaving the bulk of her estate to her daughter, Katherine Blount, in her will.⁸⁷ As discussed earlier, Isabel and her husband brought a Chancery claim on Katherine's behalf when her paternal grandfather attempted to disinherit her.⁸⁸ Little is known of Russhe's religious interests, although one of his daughters was a nun.⁸⁹ John Russhe commissioned the printer, Richard Pynson, 'to imprint divers bokes as the portues, the boke called Dives and pauper and divers other bokys', for which he undertook to bear

⁸⁵ Dickens, 'Early Expansion of Protestantism', 87-105; Marsh, *Popular Religion*, 10, 130; Whiting, *Blind Devotion*, 156-7. For a more cautious approach, see Christopher Haigh, *Elizabeth I* (London, 1988), 201 or Ryrie, 'Counting Sheep', 86.

⁸⁶ Christopher Haigh, *English Reformations: Religion, Politics, and Society Under the Tudors* (Oxford, 1993), 200-201; Marsh, *Popular Religion*, 131; Peter Marshall, 'Crisis of Allegiance: George Throckmorton and Henry Tudor' in Marshall and Scott, *Catholic Gentry*, 63.

⁸⁷ TNA C/530/20; TNA PROB 11/19/369.

⁸⁸ TNA C1/222/94.

⁸⁹ TNA PROB 11/11.

half the cost.⁹⁰ The books agreed were 600 copies of *Dives et Pauper*, 1000 copies of ‘Jornalles’ (which may be a ‘Diurnal’ and, thus, a book of monastic day hours or worship), 600 copies of ‘Ffestivalls’ (Mirk’s *Liber Festivalis*), 600 copies of Boccaccio’s *The Fall of Princes*, 600 mass books and 600 ‘great gilt’ primers.⁹¹ These books were Russhe’s primary focus, which (as Pynson himself claimed) he intended to ‘sende them into the countre to sell’. However, (again according to Pynson) Russhe ‘thought he cowed nat have good utteraunce without other bokys of other storys’, suggesting that he was aware that these volumes might not be the easiest texts to sell. He therefore asked for copies of more popular works which had already been printed, such as *Bevis of Hampton*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *Aesop’s Fables*, Caxton’s *Legends*, ‘Cronykyllys’ (perhaps the *Chronicles of England*), 200 middle primers, 200 lesser primers and other religious books, such as ‘doctrynallys’. These more popular works were included to ensure that his costs in the venture were met.

While there is no evidence that the Blounts read John Russhe’s books, the family link is interesting, particularly since it was Russhe who suggested the titles to Pynson and supplied the manuscripts. The high edition sizes for the four books specifically commissioned by Russhe, in spite of the fact that he did not consider them likely bestsellers, suggests that he had a personal interest in their promulgation. Mirk’s *Liber Festivalis*, which was a collection of sermons in English, was particularly popular in the late fifteenth century and had an obvious resonance with educated members of late fifteenth-century society, with a number of printed editions known.⁹² ‘Jornalls’, while harder to identify, was clearly a religious book. *The Fall of Princes* had strong links to early humanism since the English translation by John

⁹⁰ TNA C1/349/40.

⁹¹ Henry R. Plomer, ‘Two lawsuits of Richard Pynson’, *The Library*, New Series, 10 (1909), 121.

⁹² *John Mirk’s Festial*, 2 vols, ed. Susan Powell (Oxford, 2009-2011).

Lydgate printed by Pynson had been first commissioned by Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester in the fifteenth century, who was a leading early English proponent of humanism.⁹³ The work has distinct humanist overtones, although based in the late medieval tradition of improving works.

Russhe's *Dives et Pauper* was the first printed edition of the early fifteenth-century didactic tract, written in England and built on the framework of the ten commandments. Russhe owned the manuscript used by Pynson and was evidently familiar with the contents of the work which, although not a humanist work, had much that would have resonated with later humanists. The work is written as a dialogue, between a rich man and a poor friar.⁹⁴ It has been compared to Wycliffe's *De Mandatis Divinis* of 1375/6. Indeed, *Dives et Pauper* is, in large part, a rebuttal of Wycliffe's criticisms – addressing the same questions, but affirming orthodox belief.⁹⁵ For the author, the scriptures were the foundation upon which religious faith and observance should be built, with the theme looking at how property and social position could be compatible with salvation. As such, the work contains substantial translated passages from the Vulgate Bible, which were central to the argument of the book.⁹⁶ *Dives et Pauper* was a product of its times, grounded in the debates of the early fifteenth century over the translation and circulation of the Bible in English.⁹⁷ The author makes some criticisms of the clergy but does not call for religious reform, instead highlighting the importance of scripture and other authoritative texts.⁹⁸ The central theme sought to understand the nature of God through the sources available.⁹⁹ Such a theme was entirely resonant with humanism,

⁹³ Susanne Saygin, *Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester (1390-1447) and the Italian Humanists* (Leiden, 2002), 58.

⁹⁴ *Dives and Pauper*, vol II, ed. P.H. Barnum (Oxford, 2004), xv.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, xvi.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, xviii.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, xix.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, xxiii.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, xxxix.

with many humanist ideas emerging in the fifteenth rather than the sixteenth century.¹⁰⁰ *Dives et Pauper*'s themes obviously resonated with Tudor readers, with three printed editions by 1536. A copy of this work would have been easy to obtain by Sir Thomas Blount and other family members, with the family association with John Russhe indicative of the types of educated circles with which the family mixed.¹⁰¹

Changing Beliefs

The Reformation was, of course, about change and, in particular, changing beliefs. Little information survives about the faith of Thomas Blount's eldest son, Sir John Blount of Kinlet although he was buried at Greyfriars in London, with an association with the Franciscans being a not unusual element of gentry devotion.¹⁰² John was involved in a legal dispute with two of his brothers and Thomas Mason, the vicar of Kinlet, over his father's estate, although this was a family matter rather than anything to do with faith. Mason was appointed as vicar of Kinlet by the abbot of Wigmore in March 1510.¹⁰³ He was favoured by the Bishop of Hereford, who appointed him, along with the Dean of Stottesdon, to induct the bishop's appointee to the vacant living of Deuxhill in April 1515.¹⁰⁴ He was on friendly terms with Sir Thomas Blount since he agreed to act as his executor. Certainly, he is recorded as the executor for only one other testator in the period at Kinlet, suggesting that an appointment of the vicar there was not routine.¹⁰⁵ Mason may well have had links to Wenlock Priory, since he was both born and buried in Much Wenlock.¹⁰⁶ He retired on 28 February 1539 and Alan

¹⁰⁰ Wooding, *Rethinking Catholicism*, 25.

¹⁰¹ Russhe's second executor was a lawyer, indicative of the educated circles in which he moved (TNA PROB 11/11).

¹⁰² Richard Rex, 'The Friars in the English Reformation' in Marshall and Ryrie, *Beginnings of English Protestantism*, 38-59.

¹⁰³ *Register of Richard Mayew*, 277.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 283.

¹⁰⁵ Hereford Record Office: List of probate acts granted before 1540.

¹⁰⁶ 'The Register of Sir Thomas Botelar', 102.

Cliff was appointed in his place.¹⁰⁷ This appointment was made by John Blount's widow, Katherine, and her son-in-law, Richard Lacon, by the grant of the advowson of the abbot and convent of Wigmore.¹⁰⁸ Cliff was a monk from the local Wenlock Priory, which would not be dissolved until the following January, suggesting that a monastic appointment was considered desirable by Katherine, as well as demonstrating continuing links with Wenlock Priory by the family, right up to its dissolution.¹⁰⁹

A similarly monastic appointment was made at Mamble on 12 October 1537 by Thomas Blount of Sodington 'by the gift of the advowson of the abbot and convent of Wigmore'.¹¹⁰ The appointee, Roger Purslow, had been a subdeacon of Wenlock priory since 7 June 1533, again demonstrating Blount family links to the house at Wenlock into the late 1530s.¹¹¹ Purslow's appointment took place after the death of the then vicar, Edward Rushbury, whose will survives, in which he named Sir Thomas Blount of Sodington as one of his two executors.¹¹² He also confirmed that 'I bequeathe my soule to god and to our lady and to all the company of Heven', and wished to be buried in his church. After his debts were paid, he made no specific bequests, asking only that 'the residue of my goods I put to the disposition as they thinke best for the helthe of my soule'. The provisions in the will suggest a continuing belief in Purgatory, which was beginning to be questioned in the period, and the will looks entirely conservative, although this is largely understandable given the fact that Rushbury died so early in the Reformation.

¹⁰⁷ *Registrum Caroli Bothe*, ed. Bannister, 382.

¹⁰⁸ Since at least the thirteenth century the appointment of the vicars of Kinlet had been in the grant of the Abbot of Wigmore (*The Register of Richard de Swinfield Bishop of Hereford (AD 1283-1317)*, ed. W.W. Capes (Hereford, 1909)).

¹⁰⁹ 'The Register of Sir Thomas Botelar, Vicar of Much Wenlock', 102.

¹¹⁰ *Registrum Caroli Bothe*, ed. Bannister, 379.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 330.

¹¹² TNA PROB 11/27/145.

Given that, by the Elizabethan period, most branches of the Blount family were recusants or church papists, it is pertinent to consider the religion of those members of the family who lived in the early years of the Reformation to analyse whether there was continuation of religious belief through the generations.¹¹³ One of the tombs in the chancel of Kinlet Church commemorates Sir John Blount and his wife, Katherine. The tomb has been identified as the product of the workshop of Richard Parker of Burton-upon-Trent, who was active from at least 1532 until 1569.¹¹⁴ By October 1534 he had been commissioned by William Blount, Lord Mountjoy, to produce his tomb, suggesting a family link to the selection of Parker to produce the Kinlet monument. John's nephew, Thomas Blount of Kidderminster, also engaged Parker to produce his own highly similar tomb at Kidderminster in the 1560s. Sir John Blount died on 27 February 1531 while attending parliament and was buried at Greyfriars in London, a burial place associated with the Mountjoy Blounts.¹¹⁵ Although his will does not survive, it is known that Katherine served as executor.¹¹⁶ There is no evidence that she planned to commission a monument for either herself or her husband at Kinlet, particularly since, in her own will, she requested that 'my body to be buryed upon buryall in suche place as myne executors shall thinke moste convenient'.¹¹⁷ Since she divided her time between Kinlet and her own manor of Knightley in Staffordshire, there was no certainty that she would be buried at the Blount family seat.¹¹⁸ Instead, it was probably Katherine, as executor, who commissioned a marble gravestone in the Apostles' Chapel at Greyfriars,

¹¹³ Marshall, 'Crisis of Allegiance', 31.

¹¹⁴ Jon Bayliss, 'Richard Parker 'The Alabasterman'', *Church Monuments*, 5 (1990).

¹¹⁵ John Stow, *A Survey of London, Written in the Year 1598*, ed. W.J. Thoms (London, 1842), 120.

¹¹⁶ Hereford Record Office: List of probate acts granted before 1540.

¹¹⁷ TNA PROB 11/28.

¹¹⁸ Four of Katherine's letters survive from her widowhood. Two were written at Kinlet and two at Knightley.

which was in position by November 1538 when the house was dissolved as part of the general Dissolution of the Monasteries.¹¹⁹

Greyfriars Church was closed to worshippers in 1538 and used as a store house.¹²⁰ It was finally reopened as a parish church in 3 January 1547 but, later that year, it was reduced in size and the furnishings sold or removed.¹²¹ This included the memorials, which were ‘all sold for fifty pounds or thereabouts, by Sir Martin Bowes, goldsmith and alderman of London’.¹²² Where there is evidence of graves being moved from dissolved religious houses, it tended to be when hope had been abandoned that the church could be saved.¹²³ The evidence therefore suggests that John’s grave was moved after 1547, particularly since Henry VIII’s letters patent from 1546 make it clear that the furnishings and monuments then remained undisturbed in Greyfriars’ Church.¹²⁴ The fact that the family took the trouble to exhume the corpse and carry it to Shropshire is suggestive of the religious beliefs of the couple’s heir, Sir George Blount, particularly since he then commissioned an elaborate tomb for his parents. In 1560 the defacement of monuments was declared illegal, something which suggests that it had become relatively common. Tombs, due to their association with Purgatory, could be considered to be offensive to some (although by no means all) Protestants.¹²⁵ George Blount is known to have had Catholic faith in the Elizabethan period. The tomb commissioned for John and Katherine resembles closely that of John’s grandparents, Sir Humphrey and Elizabeth Blount, which sits next to it in the chancel of the

¹¹⁹ Stow, *Survey of London*, 120.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹²¹ *Chronicle of the Grey Friars of London*, ed. J.G. Nichols (London, 1852), 49.

¹²² Stow, *Survey of London*, 120.

¹²³ Phillip Lindley, ‘“Disrespect for the Dead?” The Destruction of Tomb Monuments in Mid-Sixteenth-Century England’, *Church Monuments*, 19 (2004), 63; *The Lisle Letters*, vol V, ed. Muriel St Clare Byrne (Chicago, 1981), 1086, 1090.

¹²⁴ Lindley, ‘Disrespect for the Dead?’, 66.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

church. Both have recumbent effigies of the couple as they appeared in life, with their children depicted as weepers around the tomb chest. One noticeable difference is that John and Katherine's tomb does not include the religious imagery of Humphrey's, which depicted an angel and a female saint alongside the weepers. This omission is highly likely to have been due to the period in which the tomb was produced. Certainly, George must have had concerns that the tomb would be subject to scrutiny under Edward VI's Protestant regime.

The parish church has been described as the 'single most important public and social space in pre-Reformation Europe' and this importance continued through the sixteenth century.¹²⁶ It was central to local culture, particularly in relation to life events, such as baptism, marriage and funerals. By placing the monument in the parish church, George was making an effective statement about the status of his parents at a local level, and of his family. He was also placing his parents in a prime position to elicit intercessory prayers, something that, under traditional doctrine, would speed their passage through Purgatory, although he was doing so at a time when Purgatory had been proscribed. In traditional religion, prayers for the dead have also been described as playing an important role in familial and communal identity.¹²⁷ As such, the creation of the tomb – both in its form and in its location in the parish church – also helped perform a social community function for Sir George Blount, with social function and religious thought inextricably linked in the period. This is a tentative conclusion, since concern for family status could also have motivated the exhumation, although very few members of George's class made the effort to move the graves of even close relatives that were contained in dissolved houses, suggesting a stronger motivation from George than mere

¹²⁶ Sarah Stanbury and Virginia Chieffo Raguin 'Introduction' in Sarah Stanbury and Virginia Chieffo Raguin (eds.), *Women's Space: Patronage, Place and Gender in the Medieval Church* (Albany, 2005), 1.

¹²⁷ Lucy Wooding, 'Remembrance in the Eucharist' in Andrew Gordon and Thomas Rist (eds.), *The Arts of Remembrance in Early Modern England* (Farnham, 2013).

family honour or prestige. Certainly, George's grandfather, Sir Thomas Blount, who died at Kinlet was not furnished with the fine tomb that he requested in his will, in spite of the opportunity for family prestige in the church that this would have presented.

The construction of the tomb is particularly interesting due to the fact that George, along with his brothers, William and Henry, were raised in the household of their nephew, Henry Fitzroy, Duke of Richmond, who was a similar age to them.¹²⁸ Richmond received an excellent humanist education under the tutorship of Richard Croke and John Palsgrave, with both Sir Thomas More and Stephen Gardiner involved in arranging the curriculum, which focussed on the study of Latin and Greek, with an emphasis on classical texts.¹²⁹ Before taking his appointment with Richmond, Croke (a distant relative of the Blounts) had been Greek Reader at Cambridge.¹³⁰ The curriculum resembled that adopted for St Paul's School, which was founded by John Colet. Colet's school, which aimed to produce a laity educated in Greek and Latin had, by the 1520s, become seen as an essential means of advancement for the sons of the gentry. Sir Peter Carew, for example, who would later marry the widow of Richmond's half-brother (another Blount grandchild), recalled that his father sent him to the school in the 1530s since 'he thought best to employ this his youngest son in the schools, and so, by means of learning, to bring him to some advancement'.¹³¹

The interplay between George's faith and his excellent humanist education is an interesting one. Unlike his father and grandfather, he lived through the Reformation period and, like his

¹²⁸ George Blount's tomb epitaph at Kinlet.

¹²⁹ Murphy, *Henry Fitzroy*, 100.

¹³⁰ McConica, *English Humanists*, 80.

¹³¹ *The Life and Times of Sir Peter Carew, Kt., from the Original Manuscript*, ed. J. Maclean (London, 1857), 3-7.

contemporaries, was compelled to respond to the changing religious climate. The Henrician Reformation caused reform across the religious spectrum.¹³² George's humanist education gave him the intellectual tools that allowed him to make a choice as to his own faith. He chose to maintain his traditional beliefs in the Reformation period and into the Elizabethan era, albeit that his beliefs are less easy to identify in the period before 1558.

The register of Sir Thomas Boteler at Much Wenlock, where George's sister, Agnes Blount, and her family worshipped shows considerable change in the period. By the reign of Edward VI, baptisms had begun to be carried out in English, with Boteler noting the first Latin baptisms following Queen Mary's accession.¹³³ The church had also lost its altar by this time, with Boteler recording in June 1554 that 'the altar of our blessed Lady the virgin Marie within this Church of Wenlock was erected & of newe reedified'.¹³⁴ In Henry VIII's reign, the church had also had an image of Our Lady of Pity.¹³⁵ It owned a cross of copper gilt in the 1540s, as well as a banner decorated with the image of the Trinity in silk.¹³⁶ There are numerous references to mass being celebrated in the Register. Agnes Blount and her husbands, Richard Lacon and Thomas Ridley, were involved in the church community. In 1541, for example, the youngest child of Agnes's first marriage, Edward Lacon, was baptised in the church.¹³⁷ On 16 January 1542 her first husband, Richard Lacon was buried at Harley after 'lycence being obtained of me Sir Thomas Butlar at the request of divers gentlemen of the neighbourhood'.¹³⁸ One of the couple's servants was buried in the church in 1545.¹³⁹

¹³² Wooding, *Rethinking Catholicism*, 51.

¹³³ 'Register of Sir Thomas Botelar', 123.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹³⁵ Hartshorne, 'Sir Thomas Butler', 84.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹³⁷ 'Register of Sir Thomas Botelar', 115.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹³⁹ Hartshorne, 'Sir Thomas Butler', 89.

Agnes also played an important role in the visit of Nicholas Heath, Bishop of Worcester, in July 1554.¹⁴⁰ The Bishop was invited to take refreshments in the town and was taken to the house of a local gentleman, which was ‘hanged & decked after the best manner the said Burgess could’. The silver plate from which the bishop drank was borrowed from Agnes, suggesting that she approved of the visit.¹⁴¹ Later that year, in November, Agnes’s infant son (from her second marriage), George Ridley, was buried by Boteler at Willey.¹⁴² Agnes had a personal association with Boteler, since they both stood as godparents to Agnes Charlton when she was baptised at Willey on 12 March 1540.¹⁴³

It is very obvious from his Register that Sir Thomas Boteler did not embrace the religious reform of Edward VI’s reign, although his feelings on the Henrician church are less easy to categorise. In 1546 he recorded that he preached from the pulpit on the subject of Henry VIII’s earlier proclamation against the ‘heretical books’ of Frith, Tyndale, Wycliff, Joye, Roy, ‘Basille’ (the pen-name of Thomas Becon), Bale, Barnes, Coverdale, Turner and Tracy.¹⁴⁴ He was opposed to the suppression of Much Wenlock Priory.¹⁴⁵ He lamented the destruction of St Milburga’s tomb and the burning of images in the town in November 1547.¹⁴⁶ He was also fulsome in his joy at the accession of Mary, declaring that, when the proclamation was made in the town ‘people made great joy casting up their capps and hats lauding thancking & praysing God Almightye with ringing of Belles & making of bone fires in every street’.¹⁴⁷ He recorded the renewed use of Latin in services and the fact that mass

¹⁴⁰ ‘Register of Sir Thomas Botelar’, 123.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁴² Hartshorne, ‘Sir Thomas Butler’, 95.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁴⁴ ‘Register of Sir Thomas Botelar’, 119.

¹⁴⁵ Hartshorne, ‘Sir Thomas Butler’, 83. For example, Boteler and James Ball, a monk of St Millburga both stood as godfathers at a baptism in January 1539.

¹⁴⁶ ‘Register of Sir Thomas Botelar’, 120.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

was celebrated in the church again following the accession. On 25 June 1559, however, he recorded that ‘here is to be had in remembrance that the celebration of the divine service in the English tonge was begon this day’.¹⁴⁸ Clearly, Boteler obeyed the law, but he did so with no great enthusiasm, setting the likely tone for worship in the parish.

Once again, identifying belief is problematic. Only a few wills of Blount family members survive for the Reformation period, although Agnes’s mother, Katherine Blount’s, exists from January 1540. In her preamble, she stated that ‘I bequeath my soule unto almightie god the father the son and the holy goste three persones and one god’. She left charitable bequests of forty pounds to be distributed on the day of her burial and at her month’s mind, as well as a small charitable bequest of money to buy vestments for the parish church at Kinlet. Otherwise, the bequests were made to family and servants, with no other charitable sums. In 1540 England was still a largely traditionally religious country, albeit one that had undergone substantial religious reform in the preceding decade. Katherine’s will is therefore a cautious one. There are no overtly Protestant references, such as justification by faith, although, similarly, references to the saints are also lacking. The will is ambiguous and suffers from the usual difficulty in assigning religious meaning to a preamble. The appointment by her of a monk (Alan Cliff) to the vicarage at Kinlet in 1539 is suggestive that she may have been traditional in her faith, particularly since Cliff remained the incumbent for the entirety of Edward VI’s reign. Indeed, Cliff’s continued position as vicar of Kinlet does raise the question of just how far the Protestant Reformation had permeated into the popular religion of the parish, in spite of the legal changes wrought.¹⁴⁹ Indeed, it has been noted that many

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 130.

¹⁴⁹ Such a mismatch between the legal and popular responses to the Reformation is highlighted in the work of Haigh who pointed out that ‘for a decade or more, the Church of England was a Protestant Church with many Catholic churches; for even longer, it was a Protestant Church with many Catholic, or at least conservative, clergy’ (Haigh, *Church of England, the Catholics and the People*, 197). Patrick Collinson, ‘The Elizabethan

parishes were not served by a committed Protestant minister until late in the reign of Elizabeth I.¹⁵⁰ In an inventory of Kinlet parish church carried out on 17 May 1553 it was recorded that the church had retained four bells, one saint bell and one chalice of silver, something that again indicates that the religious changes of Edward VI's reign were not embraced in the parish.¹⁵¹ There is certainly nothing overtly 'Protestant' in any of the sources relating to the Blounts from the early Reformation period but the evidence would appear to suggest that they conformed to the faith of the state, much as Sir Thomas Boteler did, in spite of his obvious distress at the dissolution of Much Wenlock Priory. Neither Boteler nor Cliff seem likely to have undertaken Protestant worship in their parish churches with any great enthusiasm.

The evidence of gentry families who held traditional beliefs, such as the Blounts, suggests that while, on a theological level an individual might disapprove of the dissolution, this did not mean that they were unwilling to profit from it. Blounts sought monastic lands following the dissolution of the monasteries. Sir George Blount of Kinlet was able to acquire a lease of the prebendary lands close to his manor at Gnossal in Staffordshire, before passing them on to three of his servants, for example, a purchase that gave him the authority to convene the manor court there for the first time.¹⁵² He had also earlier shown an interest in monastic lands when, in April 1536, he vied with Sir Simon Harcourt and Henry, Lord Stafford, to be permitted to purchase Ranston Priory in Staffordshire in the event that it was dissolved.¹⁵³

Church and the New Religion' in Haigh, *Reign of Elizabeth I*, 174 too notes that there was widespread belief in the period that only a small proportion of parishioners truly believed.

¹⁵⁰ Amussen, *An Ordered Society*, 22.

¹⁵¹ 'Inventories of the Church Goods of Shropshire Temp. Edward VI with Notes, Index of Places, and Glossary', *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*, 2nd Series 12 (1900), 310. As Marshall, *Heretics and Believers*, 7 notes traditional religion designated certain objects, such as bells, as sacramentals: 'they were not assured vehicles of grace, but could convey it if approached in an appropriate spirit of piety'. The survival of Kinlet's bells suggests continuing traditional religious belief in the parish.

¹⁵² Erdeswick, *Staffordshire*, 174.

¹⁵³ Michael Greenslade, *Catholic Staffordshire* (Leominster, 2006), 17.

The priory was close to the lands of all three men, with Henry, Lord Stafford, writing to Cromwell that month to offer to match any other bid on the property, stating that he was concerned since he had ‘heard that George Blount endeavours to obstruct my suit’.¹⁵⁴ George was unsuccessful on this occasion. George’s mother, Katherine Blount, was anxious to provide for her younger sons, Henry and William. On 21 February 1536 she wrote to Cromwell from Kinlet, requesting that he grant her the property of ‘certain abbeys and priories’ that she had heard the king intended to dissolve, so that she could ‘take some of them for my two younger sons’. Thomas Blount of Kidderminster received, in 1554, a manor in Kidderminster which had belonged to the Lazar House of Maiden Bradley. His patron, the executed Duke of Northumberland, had previously received it from Henry VIII.¹⁵⁵ Members of the family had been interested in Maiden Bradley’s lands at Kidderminster since the mid-fifteenth century, when the first John Blount of Kinlet leased the rectory there from the monastery.¹⁵⁶ In 1522 Sir Thomas Blount of Kinlet held the rectory at Kidderminster, as well as the monastery’s one third share of the manor of Kidderminster, which he leased from the monastery jointly with his wife, Anne, second son, Edward and Edward’s wife.

Similarly, Robert Blount of Astley acquired the lands of Astley Priory, including the manor of Astley, when they were conveyed to him by Sir Ralph Sadler in 1544.¹⁵⁷ The priory had previously been very central to what had always been a small parish, with its buildings neighbouring the parish church, which was in the possession of the priory. Robert Blount’s father received the grant of the manor of Wichenford in Worcestershire from the Duke of

¹⁵⁴ *L&P* 10, 741.

¹⁵⁵ *A Survey of Worcestershire by Thomas Habington*, vol II, ed. J. Amphlett (Worcestershire Historical Society, 1899), 158.

¹⁵⁶ A.J. Perrett, ‘The Blounts of Kidderminster’, *Transactions of the Worcestershire Archaeological Society*, 19 (1942), 10.

¹⁵⁷ *Habington’s Survey of Worcestershire*, ed. Amphlett, 14.

Northumberland in 1552.¹⁵⁸ The manor had previously belonged to the see of Worcester and had been confiscated and given to Dudley when the Catholic bishop, Nicholas Heath, was deprived of his see. While the acquisition of monastic or ecclesiastical property need not be proof that a person sympathised with the reformed faith, such acquisitions did draw the opprobrium of some later Catholics in England. The Catholic antiquarian, Thomas Habington (1560-1647), who wrote a survey of his native Worcestershire, for example, when writing of the Wichenford acquisition, lamented ‘O, insatiable hunger, which, not glutted with a feast of so many ruined monasteryes, must also ravin on Bishoprickes which because you could not in policy overthrowe, you would lesson to inlarge your greatenes, and in the vessels of the sacred Temple advance your idoles, the powers of thys darkened world, tyll the kyngdome passed from your disordered dominion to them who besides theyre most iust tytell have byn most worthy and peaceable governors’.¹⁵⁹

Other branches of the family, too, sought former monastic property. The Blounts of Mapledurham acquired Bicester Abbey from Henry VIII after it was dissolved, with the property passing to Sir Michael Blount and then his son, Sir Richard. In 1608 Sir Richard Blount brought a case in the Chancery Courts to confirm whether they held the land free of tithes due to the church since it was no longer religious land, something with which the court agreed.¹⁶⁰ In 1610 George Blount of Sodington purchased lands from another local gentleman which had formerly belonged to the chantry of the Blessed Mary in the Church at Knighton, as set out clearly in the deed of sale – something that indicates that the land’s history and previous church ownership was remembered.¹⁶¹ The land was later sold on by George’s son,

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 322.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ *Cases Concerning Equity and the Courts of Equity 1550-1660, vol I*, ed. William Hamilton Bryson (London, 2001), 140.

¹⁶¹ *The Kyre Park Charters*, ed. John Amphlett (Leicestershire Historical Society, 1905), 279.

Walter, in 1618 for £3000.¹⁶² This is interesting since, at the same time that the Blounts of Sodington were involved in the purchase of former chantry property, they were effectively maintaining their own private chantry chapel at Mamble (see chapter 6). Clearly they saw no contradiction here, with it evident that contemporaries did not necessarily regard the dispersal of religious property as an attack on traditional religion.

The acquisition of monastic land also need not be associated with the despoiling of the church. In September 1537 Richard Lacon of Willey (husband of Agnes Blount of Kinlet) purchased lands lying within the park of Willey from Wenlock Priory, promising a perpetual annual payment of 13s. 4d. to the priory.¹⁶³ Monasteries had always leased lands – as the example of the monastic lands at Kidderminster shows – arguably, therefore, the idea of receiving a grant of former monastic lands or taking a lease of them was not something that conflicted with a person holding traditional faith in the Reformation Period.

The Astley Blounts would have been aware of a hermitage within their home parish. Unlike more formal monasticism, hermits were unregulated and unofficial, living either from their own works or from charitable donations and might have their own chapel.¹⁶⁴ The Reformation and the development of Protestantism had a profound impact on the religious landscape and the devotional culture crystallised around it, although the evidence of the hermitage at Radston's Ferry in Astley suggests that recognising and understanding this impact can be problematic.¹⁶⁵ While the religious landscape changed dramatically during the

¹⁶² Ibid., 286.

¹⁶³ 'Deeds Relating to Willey', ed. G. Potts, *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society*, 51 (1941-3), 10.

¹⁶⁴ Swanson, *Church and Society*, 272.

¹⁶⁵ Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape* (Oxford, 2011), 80.

Reformation period, sites were sometimes able to retain their traditional meaning even after dissolution. Thomas Habington, in his *Survey of Worcestershire*, which he began in the 1590s, recorded that, in recent memory, there had been a hermitage beside the River Severn in the parish of Astley. The hermitage, which survives today, was cut out of the rock above the river and, in the mid-nineteenth century was still noted to contain a chapel, refectory, dormitories and arched passageways.¹⁶⁶ According to Bishop Latimer, in a letter to Cromwell in 1538, it was ‘able to lodge 500 men, and as ready for thieves or traitors as true men’. Latimer suggested that it would be better to have ‘true men’ as masters of the hermitage than hermits.¹⁶⁷ Habington recording that ‘over the Altar is paynted an Archbishop saying Masse before all the Instruments of our Savyour’s passyon, and above certain lynes nowe dashed out, declaringe I thincke some Indulgence to suche as frequented here with devotion, which caused me to suppose it was dedicated to St Thomas of Canterbury’.¹⁶⁸ This is most likely an image of the mass of St Gregory, to which there was an indulgence attached, all of which would be expected to be considered highly offensive to Protestants in the period given the image’s assertion of divine approval of the papacy, the truth of the Real Presence and the Indulgence itself, which remitted the punishment for sins to those who attended the hermitage to worship. Habington recorded that it was a major devotional site in the local area: ‘many who trafficked on thys river gave as they passed by in theyre barges somewhat of theyre commodities in charity to thys Hermyte’. It is known, too, both to have had its own priest in the medieval period and to have been occupied by ‘brethren’.¹⁶⁹ In Habington’s time, it was also still possible to see the arms of England carved between those of the Beauchamp Earls of Warwick and the Mortimer family, something which again demonstrates its once high

¹⁶⁶ Noake’s *Guide to Worcestershire*, 21.

¹⁶⁷ *L&P* 13 part 2, 186

¹⁶⁸ *Habington’s Survey of Worcestershire*, ed. Amphlett, 18.

¹⁶⁹ *A History of the County of Worcester*, vol 4, eds. William Page and J.W. Willis-Bund (Victoria County History, London, 1924) [hereafter *VCH Worcestershire* 4], 230-237.

significance. There is no information linking the Astley Blounts to the hermitage, although, given its size and importance, they must have been aware of its existence. It was not built on part of the family's lands, instead belonging to Sir Thomas Bromley when Thomas Habington described it. Interestingly, the hermitage was not granted to secular ownership until 1563.¹⁷⁰ It was, of course, difficult for the authorities to remove natural features with religious significance, such as holy wells.¹⁷¹ However, this does not account for the failure to whitewash the images. Surviving sites – including the hermitage – may have benefitted from a certain liminal status: 'many such sites lay in the property of nobility, gentry, and yeomen and therefore outside the jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical and civil authorities'.¹⁷² Hugh Latimer, as Bishop of Worcester, was clearly aware of the hermitage and found it offensive, but does not appear to have had the power to close it down. The fact that the paintings were not whitewashed following the breaking up of the community there also suggests that the site retained its importance to some extent although, by 1868, at least, it seems to have lost all religious significance to the local population. The antiquary John Noake recorded then that 'it was recently occupied by poor folk, and one portion was once an ale-house and another a school!'¹⁷³ The religious images, recorded by Habington, also no longer survive.

Religious identities formed slowly in this period, with it suggested that examples of 'collaboration' have been overlooked by historians in favour of the more tangible – and, thus, identifiable concept of resistance.¹⁷⁴ An example of collaboration is the way that individuals with no apparent Protestant leanings chose to act as mouthpieces for the regime – for

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 230-237.

¹⁷¹ Walsham, *Reformation of the Landscape*, 111. The Prior's Well at Astley still remains in the parish near the entrance to the churchyard and is remembered as part of the dissolved priory. It is the only substantial part of the building to survive; see Noake's *Guide to Worcestershire*, 21.

¹⁷² Walsham, *Reformation of the Landscape*, 111.

¹⁷³ Noake's *Guide to Worcestershire*, 21.

¹⁷⁴ Shagan, *Popular Politics*, 11.

example, informing on others who defended the authority of the pope.¹⁷⁵ In this way it was possible for the Reformation to be advanced by the government through the actions of those who had in no way changed their religious faith: effectively their collaboration made them susceptible to political and social change which would later drive the spiritual change.¹⁷⁶

Another way of characterising such collaboration might be conformity, with those who conformed to the state religion often overlooked, something which Shagan argues is due to an emphasis on the Reformation as a theological event, something that would require the motives of the collaborators to match those of the reformers in the government.¹⁷⁷ Instead, he characterises collaboration or conformity to ‘refer to political actions in which subjects contributed to the effectiveness of controversial government policies’, a definition that will be adopted here.¹⁷⁸ Some bishops, who apparently conformed during Henry’s reign, refused to do so under Edward VI and Elizabeth I, often leading to their imprisonment – something which could suggest that they viewed Henry VIII’s supremacy as schism rather than heresy, or even as justifiable since there were arguments in favour of Royal Supremacy.¹⁷⁹ As Peter Marshall and others have identified, attempts to pigeonhole the religion of Henry VIII’s reign in accordance with later terminology is deeply problematic.¹⁸⁰ Since the Henrician Reformation was distinct from the rise of Protestantism, it is debateable whether these bishops can be said even to have been conforming: the Henrician reforms stressed the abandonment of superstition, not traditional religion itself, providing that they could be

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 16.

¹⁷⁶ Whiting, *Blind Devotion*, 259.

¹⁷⁷ O’Grady, *Conforming Catholics*, 4; Shagan, *Popular Politics*, 13.

¹⁷⁸ Shagan, *Popular Politics*, 13.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 14, 18-20, 120.

¹⁸⁰ Marshall, *Religious Identities*, 3. Also see Diarmid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe’s House Divided 1490-1700* (London, 2003), 338.

placed within a Biblical framework.¹⁸¹ As such, the acceptance of Henry VIII's supremacy by a 'Catholic' was not necessarily either unprincipled or evidence of conformity.¹⁸² The Henrician Reformation uniquely served to bind religious conformity together with loyalty to the state: a person who refused to recognise the royal supremacy was guilty of treason rather than heresy under Henry VIII (although they arguably also fulfilled the legal definition of heresy in England).¹⁸³ Equally, there was considerable religious fluidity during Henry's reign and the complexity of the period should not be understated.¹⁸⁴ Sir George Blount of Kinlet's detention in January 1537 of a friar who had dissipated the goods of his monastery and returned to secular dress without authority or his taking of the surrender of Tong College in September 1546 on the orders of the chancellor of the augmentations, for example, could be taken as evidence of continuing traditional beliefs but, equally, it can demonstrate a locally prominent individual prosecuting the law irrespective of faith.¹⁸⁵ The position, as with so much of the period, is uncertain.

One particular incident from early in the Reformation illustrates the complexities of religious and political loyalties in the localities. Thomas Blount of Kidderminster wrote to Cromwell regarding religiously-sensitive events in Kidderminster on 27 July 1538, suggesting that he had taken on the role of government informer. That day, eight men and two women were executed in the town for denying the king's supremacy. As part of the execution, the group listened to a sermon by Doctor Taillour in which he persuaded them to take their deaths

¹⁸¹ Wooding, *Rethinking Catholicism*, 79.

¹⁸² Ethan Shagan, 'Confronting Compromise: The Schism and its Legacy in Mid-Tudor England' in Shagan, *Catholics and the 'Protestant Nation'*, 149.

¹⁸³ Bernard, *Late Medieval English Church*, 17; Marshall, 'Papist as heretic'; Swanson, *Church and Society*, 95.

¹⁸⁴ Marshall and Ryrie, 'Protestantisms and their Beginnings', 6; Marshall, *Religious Identities*, 4. Henry VIII himself is well-known to have a wide range of religious contacts and interest in religious reform; for example, see Rory McEntegart, *Henry VIII, the League of Schmalkaldan, and the English Reformation* (London, 2002).

¹⁸⁵ John Strype, *Annals of the Reformation and Establishment of Religion, and other various occurrences in the Church of England during Queen Elizabeth's happy reign*, vol 2 part 1 (Oxford, 1824), 272. TNA SP4/1 f.99 no.30.

charitably.¹⁸⁶ The following day, two local men, John Lownde and Henry More, were standing at the church gates when Miles Denison, a Kidderminster tailor, asked them for a pot of ale. He assured them that he would not drink until after high mass. More commented that ‘we shall have a sermon to-day’, something of which Lownde said he was glad. Denison, however, declared that ‘there is a foolish knave priest come to preach of the new learning which I set not by’. He also declared that ‘my Lord hath sent a foolish puppy and a boy to make a sermon of the New Law’. Lownde warned Denison that he should be careful with what he said, or he would find himself sitting ‘by the heels’ in the stocks. Denison, however, continued to speak out against Hugh Latimer, Bishop of Worcester, before declaring that he wished that the preacher at the executions had fallen from his platform while he preached. Throughout the morning’s sermon, Denison complained ‘I would he were done and I were at my dinner’. Lownde chose to make his report to Thomas Blount of Kidderminster, who reported the matter.

Thomas Blount of Kidderminster almost certainly held traditional beliefs, but this did not preclude him from reporting Denison, suggesting that he collaborated and conformed. In his will of 1568, Thomas stated that ‘I gyve and bequeath my soule unto the mercie of god hoping to possesse the heavenlie kingdom with all saintes’.¹⁸⁷ He left bequests to family members, including his two sons, Edward and Christopher and his wife, Margaret, all of whom are known with certainty to have been Catholic in the Elizabethan period (see chapter 6). While Thomas Blount of Kidderminster’s will is somewhat later than the period when he seems to have acted as a government informer, it is suggestive of traditional faith, particularly in relation to the reference to the saints. Will preambles are obviously problematic although

¹⁸⁶ *L&P* 13 part 1, 1509.

¹⁸⁷ TNA PROB 11/51/110.

Thomas was himself a lawyer, suggesting that he may have had some involvement in its drafting. A traditional interpretation of his faith accords with the other evidence of his life. He commissioned a traditional tomb from Richard Parker, the alabasterman of Stoke-in-Trent, recalling very heavily the earlier Parker tomb of Thomas' aunt and uncle, Sir John and Katherine Blount of Kinlet.

However, while it does appear that Thomas Blount of Kidderminster held at least some traditional views, there is also evidence to counter this. In 1564, for example, Bishop Sandys considered him to be a 'favourer of true religion'. The clearest example of his traditional beliefs is the fact that his five-year-old son, Christopher, was sent to be educated with William Allen at Louvain in 1561, remaining with him until Allen returned to England the following year.¹⁸⁸ Given Christopher's extreme youth, he probably left England in Allen's company, and he must have been committed to his care by his parents. Thomas's apparent willingness to conform is likely to have smoothed his path to office. He served in parliament for Worcestershire twice in the Elizabethan period (1559 and 1563) and was also a member of the Council of the Marches.¹⁸⁹

The idea that religious loyalties were not incompatible with political service can also be supported by looking at the position of a more distant family member – Walter Blount of Uttoxeter in Staffordshire (whose son would later spend years in the Marshalsea for his Catholic beliefs). The first Walter Blount of Uttoxeter, who died in around 1543 appears to have held religious beliefs distinct to his branch of the family and from the wider Blount

¹⁸⁸ Anthony Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses*, vol I (London, 1813), 616.

¹⁸⁹ Perrett, 'Blounts of Kidderminster', 12.

family. He indicates that an individual could serve a noble patron (in Walter's case, Henry, Lord Stafford) and be trusted by them, in spite of a disparity of religious beliefs, providing that that individual was prepared to prioritise adherence to the law over adherence to personal religious thought. Such a position has parallels in the Elizabethan period, as will be discussed. On 30 January 1535, when Stafford wrote to Thomas Cromwell to request that he be permitted to take over the upkeep of a religious hospital dedicated to St John, which had been founded by his family 'for daily service and maintenance of certain poor people', he used Blount as his messenger, requesting that Cromwell should 'give credence to my friend Walter Blount'.¹⁹⁰ While Stafford, who held largely traditional religious beliefs, was satisfied with Blount's loyalty and reliability in January 1535, within three weeks the pair had quarrelled over religion. According to Sir John Gifford, in a letter similarly addressed to Cromwell, a bill of heresy was exhibited against Walter Blount of Uttoxeter at the court sessions held for Staffordshire.¹⁹¹ Blount was lucky that Gifford took steps to protect him by conveniently losing the bill against him. This was fortunate since, as Gifford reported 'if it had been submitted to the jury, it would have been found against him, as there was an evil rumour that he has spoken lightly of the saints; and at the last sessions he openly, at dinner, before my Lord Stafford, Sir Edward Aston, Sir Philip Dracote, Sir John Harcourte, and others, spake light words of the saints, to which my Lord Stafford objected'. Blount had evidently misjudged the religious inclinations of his patron and he was lucky to escape punishment for heresy. The incident is interesting, since it happened less than three weeks after Stafford had trusted Walter enough to use him as his emissary to Cromwell. Walter is hardly likely to have developed his Reformist religious beliefs in this short period, particularly since there is other evidence of his sympathies. Both Gifford and Blount served

¹⁹⁰ *L&P* 8, 130.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 619.

together on a commission relating to the tenths of spiritualities, for example.¹⁹² In November 1534 Walter wrote personally to Cromwell suggesting that, from his reading of history, he was concerned that many insurrections had been caused by noblemen and subjects as a result of the threat to royal authority posed by the governance of bishops, abbots and priors over their tenants.¹⁹³ In his letter he suggested that, since the king was now recognised as the Supreme Head of the Church, he should be authorised by parliament to appoint stewards for religious lands personally. Blount was educated, with Lord Ferrers noting to Cromwell that he was ‘learned in the law’.¹⁹⁴ Lord Stafford was presumably aware of Walter’s beliefs, but they did not become an issue until he voiced sentiments that – in their criticism of the saints – were openly heretical and very openly in opposition to his patron’s beliefs.

There was widespread collaboration and conformity in the early Reformation in England.¹⁹⁵ As the Blounts demonstrate, such a position could be justified by the needs of the community and the idea of being in charity with the members of the community. There is certainly no evidence of rapid conversion amongst the Blounts, with the exception, perhaps, of Walter Blount of Uttoxeter. In the main, the silence in the sources as to the family’s beliefs suggest that they appeared outwardly uncontroversial and in line with the state. This political conformity by members of the gentry with traditional beliefs is not unusual for the period and again highlights the difficulties in attempting to situate or describe personal faith or identify changes in religious belief in the period. While some level of change in religious belief is clear in England in the period before 1547, the extent of this as opposed to political conformity is still far from decided.

¹⁹² Ibid., 149.

¹⁹³ *L&P* 7, 1495.

¹⁹⁴ *L&P* 12 part 1, 193.

¹⁹⁵ Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 5.

Conclusion

The English Reformation was about change, although it was by no means a rapid or widely welcomed process.¹⁹⁶ Until at least the late 1540s (and probably much later), it is highly problematic even to speak of ‘Catholics or ‘Protestants’. Even in the later Reformation period, there was much common ground. On his tomb in Astley Church, Walter Blount of Astley (d.1562) was depicted lying recumbent, reading from an open book. The words on the book are from the opening of the fifty-first psalm ‘*Miserere mei Deus secundum magnam misericordiam tuam et secundum multitudinem miserationum tuarum.*’¹⁹⁷ Lady Jane Grey recited this psalm on her way to the scaffold while for Walter, who would be considered a Catholic, the words of the psalm presumably demonstrated his hopes of salvation after death.

The idea of two individuals with such divergent religious beliefs finding comfort in the same psalm is illuminating. The English Reformation, which began with political change, should be studied in relation to the responses and faith of the people who lived through it. In relation to the Blount family and their responses, it is possible to answer some of the questions posed at the beginning of the chapter, while also recognising that many still defy explanation. Religion permeated society in sixteenth-century England but, as has been identified, this religion was also strongly linked to the person of the monarch and their government, making it very difficult to establish personal beliefs with any certainty. The dissolution of the monasteries was, of course, tied up with Henry VIII’s religious reforms, but the evidence of the Blounts and other families suggests that it was possible to seek monastic lands while still

¹⁹⁶ Marsh, ‘Piety and persuasion’, 161.

¹⁹⁷ ‘Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy great mercy. And according to the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my iniquity’.

retaining traditional beliefs. Notions of conformity with the state are problematic in this period due to the religious obedience that a subject owed to their king.

The surviving evidence for the Blounts in the late medieval period supports views of the late medieval church as popular and vibrant, with it clear that the church was central to society, albeit that no family members show excessive piety. Indeed, the church appears instead to have been conceived of as very much a part of everyday life. Following the Break with Rome, the Blounts show no dramatic conversion. Instead, their personal faith is difficult to identify although, in the main, it appears to have been traditional. As such, their use as an example supports some revisionist views of the Reformation and helps set many of the traditional arguments aside. While battles raged about which theology had the right to call itself the Catholic Church, it is hardly surprising that many chose to follow the religion of the state: for the vast majority of the Reformation period, religion was not settled, it was in a state of flux.

Chapter 6: Religious Devotion in the Elizabethan Period

Early modern British Catholics once received little attention from historians. This changed with the publication of John Bossy's *The English Catholic Community* in 1975, which focussed on the English Catholics as a self-contained community, isolated from their Protestant neighbours.¹ For Bossy, the English Catholic Church was 'a body which had some right to claim continuity with the past but was nevertheless in most respects a new creation', having developed following the arrival of the seminary priests and the Jesuits in the 1570s and 1580s respectively.² While Bossy was challenged by Christopher Haigh, who considered that Protestantism developed largely due to the legislation of the Reformation and that it was several generations before it was adopted by most of the population, he too focussed on recusancy (the refusal to attend Protestant church services), as did other scholars.³ While the existence of a large number of those with residual Catholic beliefs was acknowledged, they were not the focus of research.⁴

Alexandra Walsham changed this perspective with *Church Papists*, which considered church papistry (where an individual with Catholic beliefs periodically attended the Protestant parish church) as a strategy in its own right, rather than simply as a route towards recusancy.⁵

Indeed, it is now acknowledged by historians that English Catholics could move between

¹ Bossy, *English Catholic Community*.

² Bossy, *English Catholic Community*, 11. Bossy, 'Character of Elizabethan Catholicism', 39-59; Pritchard, *Catholic Loyalty*, 4 and Aveling, *Handle and the Axe*, 52 express similar views.

³ Haigh, *Reformation and Resistance*; Christopher Haigh, ed., *The English Reformation Revised* (Cambridge, 1987); Haigh, *English Reformations*; Aveling, *Handle and the Axe*, 61; Holmes, *Resistance and Compromise*, 81; Underwood, *Childhood, Youth and Religious Dissent*, 11.

⁴ A.G. Dickens, 'The First Stages of Romanist Recusancy in Yorkshire 1560-1590', *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, 35 (1941), 157-181; Aveling, *The Handle and the Axe*, 60.

⁵ Walsham, *Church Papists*.

conformity and recusancy throughout their lives and that, as such, the categories should not be considered as mutually exclusive.⁶

The Catholic Church as an institution underwent substantial reform at the Council of Trent, adopting 'a more dynamic and militant stance'.⁷ As Patrick Collinson has recognised, Elizabethan church policy had limited aims, seeking outward submission rather than actual belief, although this compliance was not necessarily easy to obtain.⁸ For sixteenth-century Catholic theologians, the starting point was that Protestant church services were heretical and that it was against divine law for Catholics to attend them. Even Alban Langdale, who argued the case for permissible attendance, did not do so on the grounds that there was anything defensible about Protestant services, but on the basis that there was Scriptural precedent for attending an ungodly service.⁹ For the Jesuit, Henry Garnet, it was heresy for a Catholic to attend such a service, although other less prominent writers did admit that some degree of conformity could be forgiven.¹⁰ Thomas Bell, attacked by Garnet in two works printed in late 1592 or early 1593, made a case for occasional conformity. There was therefore some authority for English Catholics to attend Protestant services, but the issue was a highly contentious one since the Council of Trent had declared that conformity was a mortal sin. To be a church papist was not to take the path of least resistance, since it posed a very real threat

⁶ Michael C. Questier, *Conversion, Politics and Religion in England, 1580-1625* (Cambridge, 1996), 204; Gerard Kilroy, *Edmund Campion, A Scholarly Life* (Aldershot, 2005), 3; Arthur F. Marotti, *Religious Ideology and Cultural Fantasy* (Notre Dame, 2005), 30; Questier, *Catholicism and Community*, 159; Alexandra Walsham, *Catholic Reformation in Protestant Britain* (Farnham, 2014), 55; Michael Questier, 'The Politics of Religious Conformity and the Accession of James I', *Historical Research*, 71 (1998), 14-30.

⁷ Guy Bedouelle, *The Reform of Catholicism, 1480-1620* (2008), 125.

⁸ Collinson, 'The Elizabethan Church and the New Religion', 178; Patrick Collinson, 'Politics of Religion and the Religion of Politics in Elizabethan England', *Historical Research*, 82 (2009), 80.

⁹ 'A discourse delivered to Mr Sheldon to persuade him to conform. Arguments to prove it lawful for a Roman Catholic to attend the Protestant service' (TNA SP12/144/69). The work was circulated anonymously, although it was attributed to Langdale during his lifetime.

¹⁰ Henry Garnet, *An Apology Against the Defence of Schisme* (1593) and *A Treatise of Christian Renunciation* (1593). Garnet wrote to counter the arguments of the influential priest, Thomas Bell in his manuscript treatise 'A comfortable advertisement to afflicted Catholics'.

to the immortal soul.¹¹ Similarly, since it was a legal requirement to attend Protestant services in England, recusancy and conformity were also legal and political issues.¹²

The evidence of the Blount family supports the prevailing historiographical consensus that individuals commonly moved between recusancy and church papistry throughout their lives and that the two experiences of Catholicism should not be treated in opposition. In 1581 fines were increased to £20 per month per recusant, with two-thirds of their goods and lands forfeit if they could not pay, something which represented a very considerable disincentive. Very few people appear consistently in recusancy rolls, suggesting that even persistent recusants did, at times, attend church.

Similarly, even for those Catholics who did refuse to attend church, it could be difficult to access Catholic priests or services. As Walsham has noted, late medieval Catholicism was a ritual way of life and much of this was stripped away in England in the early years of the Reformation.¹³ While, as she notes, Catholic services did continue to be carried out covertly in Elizabethan England, this in itself was problematic. The Council of Trent, for example, proscribed the celebration of the Eucharist in private houses. There was no ideal course of action for Catholics who were forced in all circumstances to compromise their faith or worship to some degree, with surviving sources revealing a very wide range of responses to

¹¹ Holmes, *Resistance and Compromise*, 89; Walsham, *Catholic Reformation*, 55; Marshall, *Heretics and Believers*, xvi notes that conformity ‘could represent a complex and sophisticated adaptation of conscience to conditions’.

¹² Walsham, *Catholic Reformation*, 12.

¹³ Alexandra Walsham, ‘Beads, Books and Bare Ruined Choirs: Transmutations of Catholic Ritual Life in Protestant England’ in B.J. Kaplan, B. Moore, H. van Nierop and J. Pollmann (eds.), *Catholic Communities in Protestant States: Britain and the Netherlands c.1570-1720* (Manchester, 2009), 103.

the problem which, as Walsham has identified, were ‘characterised by various degrees of partial, occasional and qualified conformity’.¹⁴

Perceptions of Catholics also changed during Elizabeth’s reign, since religious conformity became linked to ideas of English identity in the period and the dividing line between treason and popery was blurred since Elizabeth’s Settlement of 1559 had confirmed the queen as Supreme Governor of the church whilst requiring that everyone attend Protestant services.¹⁵ Catholic political engagement has increasingly been recognised by historians, with the political ambivalence of some of the central figures, such as Cardinal William Allen, acknowledged.¹⁶ This can also be seen in relation to members of the Blount family. Sir Christopher Blount of Kidderminster, for example, was known to be an active Catholic by the government for several years, yet was only arrested when he took part in Essex’s rebellion. It was not necessarily religion which saw Christopher condemned as a traitor. Similarly, known Catholic and even recusant family members could be of use to the state, demonstrating that, while outward conformity was the safer position, recusancy could be tolerated – although not in all cases.¹⁷

A Catholic, for the purposes of this study, will be taken to be an individual who saw themselves as a Catholic (such as retaining an attachment to the mass, the saints and

¹⁴ Walsham, *Catholic Reformation*, 54.

¹⁵ Dennis Flynn, *John Donne and the Ancient Catholic Nobility* (1995), 99; Holmes, *Resistance and Compromise*, 81; Kilroy, *Edmund Campion*, 3; Marotti, *Religious Ideology*, 32; Marie B. Rowlands (ed.), *English Catholics of Parish and Town 1558-1778* (London, 1999), 13.

¹⁶ Shagan, *Catholics and the ‘Protestant Nation’*; Michael Carrafiello, *Robert Persons and English Catholicism, 1580-1610* (London, 1998); John Bossy, ‘The Heart of Robert Persons’ in Thomas McCoog (ed.), *The Reckoned Expense: Edmund Campion and the Early English Jesuits* (Woodbridge, 1996), 141-158; Cogan, ‘Catholic Gentry, Family Networks and Patronage’, 152-194.

¹⁷ Walsham, *Catholic Reformation*, 16; Questier, *Catholicism and Community*; Cogan, ‘Catholic Gentry, Family Networks and Patronage’, 152-194.

purgatory) and considered themselves separate from Protestantism, usually also viewing the pope as head of the church. As will be shown below, the wider Blount family can be identified as almost entirely Catholic in the Elizabethan period, something that makes them an excellent case study through which the actions of Catholics and the way they were perceived in the period can be studied. Walsham has identified the profound effect on Catholics of being a proscribed and persecuted minority, with this proscription serving both as a straitjacket and a stimulus, and this can be recognised in relation to the Blounts.¹⁸ Family members were able to build and maintain their religious identity in spite of the diverse approaches that they took to worship and engagement with the state.

Recusancy and Church Papists

While on a theological level it was understood by most people with Catholic beliefs that they should not attend Protestant church services (particularly after 1566 when the decisions of the Council of Trent began to be known), their lived experience of being Catholics under a Protestant government could be very different. Sir George Blount of Kinlet, the most socially prominent Elizabethan member of the family (apart from Lord Mountjoy), died in 1581. He was included in a 1577 list ‘of all persons, of the Diocess of Hereforde, as refuse to come to Churche’, which was produced in order to value lands as a first step towards confiscation, indicating that he was not then attending church.¹⁹ Kinlet manor contained a private Catholic chapel under George’s successors, the Lacons, and it may be that this was already in use during George’s period of occupation. He certainly maintained a private chapel at Knightley in Staffordshire which seems to have some association with non-conformism, with parish

¹⁸ Walsham, *Catholic Reformation*, 3.

¹⁹ ‘Diocesan Returns of Recusants for England and Wales 1577’, ed. P. Ryan, *Miscellanea XII* (Catholic Record Society 22, 1921), 79.

registers for Gnosall (in which Knightley is situated), noting on 11 January 1606 that ‘they say that Anne Coope who was excommunicated was buried in the graveyard at Knightley’.²⁰ While it is not certain she was a Catholic, it seems possible.

George’s beliefs had come under suspicion before 1577. In a 1564 list of officials in his diocese, the Bishop of Hereford, perhaps tactfully, described George, who was then serving as Sheriff of Shropshire, as one of the men ‘which be counted neuters in religion’ and not someone considered to be favourable to the Protestant settlement.²¹ The Bishop of Lichfield, at the same time, considered George, who was then a Justice of the Peace in Staffordshire, to be one of those ‘accounted of good men adversaries to religion and no favourers thereof, neither in deed nor word’.²² The characterisation of Sir George Blount as both church papist and recusant depending on circumstances, fits the known circumstances of his life. Even when refusing to attend Protestant services, he was compliant to some extent. For example, in 1575 the Bishop and Dean of Worcester mediated in a matrimonial dispute between George and his wife, producing a separation agreement.²³

George’s will, which was made a few days before his death in July 1581, potentially contains his own statement about his faith. As set out in the preceding chapter, considerable caution must be employed when using will preambles as evidence of faith, since their value is debateable.²⁴ With this caveat, since wills at least purport to provide information on an

²⁰ *Gnosall Parish Registers*, ed. Adams, 56.

²¹ Letter of John Scory, Bishop of Hereford in *A Collection of Original Letters from the Bishops to the Privy Council, 1564*, ed. Mary Bateson (The Camden Miscellany 9, 1895).

²² *Staffordshire Incumbents and Parochial Records (1530-1680)*, ed. W.N. Landor (Collections for a History of Staffordshire, 1915), 370.

²³ *Acts of the Privy Council of England, vol 9, 1575-1577*, ed. John Roche Dasent (London, 1894), 2 October 1575.

²⁴ Peter Marshall, *The Catholic Priesthood and the English Reformation* (Oxford, 1994), 3.

individual's faith, they should be considered. George declared that 'firste and before all thinges I doe commende my soule unto the mercifull hands of allmightie god my onelie creator savior and redeemer, ever to existe in perpetuall ioye, and felicitie with the blessed companie of goddess faithfull people and holye angels. To the rebirth, place of ioye and perfecte felicitie, in hope by the greater mercy of god and by the meanes of deathe and passion of the onelie savior and redeemer Jesus Christe and onlie messiah, to comme unto and there to rest forevermore amen'.²⁵ The words 'blessed company of all faithful people' are found in the Holy Communion in the 1559 Book of Common Prayer, something with which George would have been familiar upon attending church.²⁶ Similarly, references to the death and passion of Christ as the means to resurrection are numerous in the 1559 Book of Common Prayer.²⁷ Even the reference to angels would not necessarily be problematic to a Protestant, since they are not intended to be worshipped in the sense that the word is used. However, this also potentially shows the skill of whoever drafted the will since, while it is acceptable to a Protestant viewpoint, it is also not actually contrary to Catholic doctrine in any way: it can function for either faith. Wills were commonly drafted by the parish clerk and could potentially reflect their beliefs rather than that of the testator. However, the evidence of other surviving Kinlet wills suggests at least that George's clause was a bespoke one.

Other family wills made similarly universal statements of faith. The 1590 will of Walter Blount of Sillington (one of the Soddington Blounts) stated merely that 'I give my soule unto Almighty God my saviour and redeemer', something which would again be acceptable to Protestants and Catholics.²⁸ Walter's father, in 1563, stated merely that 'I wille and bequeath

²⁵ TNA PROB 11/63.

²⁶ John E. Booty (ed.), *The Book of Common Prayer: The Elizabethan Prayer Book 1559*, (University of Virginia, 2005), 265.

²⁷ E.g., *Ibid.*, 224, 265, 258.

²⁸ TNA PROB 11/76/272.

my soule unto the hands of hym that creatyd me'.²⁹ Again, this is a theologically neutral statement. The 1607 will of Walter's brother, Sir George Blount of Soddington, gives no definitive indication of his faith in the statement: 'I commend my soule to Almighty god trusting assuredlie to be saved by the passion and deathe of hys sonne my savyowre Jesus Chryste'.³⁰ Another brother, Peter Blount of Soddington, whose will is dated 1615 declared in more Protestant language that 'I commend my soul to Almighty God my saviour trusting and constantly believing to be saved by his onlie merits and by the death and passion of Jesus Christ my redeemer'.³¹ However even a statement such as this, as is illustrated from the scaffold speech of Peter's cousin, Sir Christopher Blount in 1601, could be considered by an individual to be compatible with their Catholic faith (see below). The evidence here suggests the wills cannot always be taken entirely at face value, something which might have been the point of the statements of faith. Even justification by faith, while not necessarily prioritised by Catholics, can fit within a Catholic viewpoint if there is not emphasis upon justification by faith *alone*. One family member's will went even further. The frequent recusant, Thomas Blount of Astley, who died in 1622 may only have declared in his will preamble that 'I commend my soule into the hands of my maker by whose deathe and passion I hope to be saved', but he also left £30 to 'poor distressed Catholics' as an unambiguous statement of his religious faith and sympathies.³² Such an explicit reference to a testator's Catholicism is highly unusual, although it does demonstrate the surprisingly open way in which some individuals were prepared to present their faith, with Thomas Blount of Astley, whose will was a deathbed one, perhaps emboldened by approaching death.

²⁹ TNA PROB 11/46/220.

³⁰ TNA PROB 11/117/577.

³¹ TNA PROB 11/126/511.

³² Worcester Record Office: Thomas Blount of Astley's will.

The Blounts of Astley demonstrate the ability to alternate between recusancy and church papistry, supporting the prevailing historiographical position. As early as 1564, Robert Blount of Astley was referred to as one of the ‘adversaries of true religion’ by the Bishop of Worcester.³³ His daughter, Elizabeth was convicted on 28 March 1588 of recusancy since 20 September 1586.³⁴ She was convicted again on 25 July 1588 before evidently conforming. Her sister-in-law, Frances Blount, was convicted of twelve months recusancy on 28 March 1588 and of recusancy again on 15 July 1588.³⁵ Frances’ husband, Thomas, continued to attend church for some time, with his first conviction for recusancy being on 26 February 1590 for seven months’ recusancy.³⁶ The start of his recusancy ties in with the death of his wife, who was buried on 23 August 1589, raising the possibility that her ill health meant that the family took the pragmatic decision to allow her to incur fines for recusancy first and, thus, not endanger her soul by attending Protestant services.³⁷ However, given the fact that Thomas’ sister, Elizabeth, who was also resident in the household, was a recusant in the same period, it also suggests the pattern of behaviour, identified by Walsham, whereby the male head of the family attended Anglican services in order to protect the family’s resources and reputation – thereby enabling his wife’s recusancy and her safeguarding of the ‘spiritual integrity’ of the household.³⁸ Thomas Blount and his second wife Bridget later both became recusants.³⁹ Although a gentleman of some means, Thomas Blount of Astley professed himself unable to pay his fines, with his property seized in October 1590. His property was valued at £13 and his liability was then assessed at £8 14s 4d a year, a sum which was most

³³ *Collection of Original Letters*, ed. Bateson, 6.

³⁴ TNA E372/433 f.77, f.80v.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, f.80, f.80v.

³⁶ TNA E372/435, f.75v, f.51v; TNA E372/436, f.70; TNA E372/437, f.71.

³⁷ *Astley Parish Registers* (Worcestershire Parish Register Society transcriptions volume 127 – CD Rom) contain the burial.

³⁸ Walsham, *Church Papists*, 80-1; Alexandra Walsham, *Charitable Hatred* (Manchester, 2006), 191; Walsham, *Catholic Reformation*, 54.

³⁹ ‘The names and qualities of the wealthier sort of recusants in Worcester Diocese’ in C. Talbot (ed.), *Catholic Record Society: Miscellanea Recusant Records* (Catholic Record Society 53, 1961), 129.

likely far below two-thirds of his actual annual income. Fifteen years earlier, his father had valued the rents of only one of his manors as £18 a year, while Thomas Blount was widely believed to have property worth at least £100 a year.⁴⁰ Based on these figures, although onerous, £8 14s 4d a year was far from unaffordable. In 1593 Thomas submitted, attending Bishop Fletcher at Worcester Cathedral, having earlier that day attended divine service with the Bishop at Astley Parish Church. The Bishop also certified that witnesses had seen Thomas attend Astley parish church every Sunday and Holy day for the past two months, with Blount promising that he would continue to obey the law.⁴¹ As a gesture of his good faith, he had his son, another Thomas, baptised in Astley Parish Church that same year – the only one of his children baptised there. Given that Jesuits such as Henry Garnet preached that it was not lawful for a child to be baptised by a Protestant priest, this was potentially a substantial concession on Thomas Blount's part, although there were doctrinal variations on this point since any baptism was in theory valid. It was therefore not necessarily as big a concession as it might at first glance appear, arguably functioning in the same way as the ambiguous statements of faith in wills. Given the affordability of the penalties, financial considerations are unlikely to have been the main reason for Thomas' submission. The Bishop's involvement, as well as the emphasis in the submission that Thomas had 'willingly submitted himself in his due obedience to the Queen's most excellent majesty', suggests that political pressure was placed upon him to conform due to his local status. He was the first known, and highest ranking Worcestershire recusant to submit in Elizabeth's reign. Thomas Blount of Astley's willingness to conform was enough for his Catholicism to be largely ignored by the government for a time. He was evidently torn between his religious faith and his desire to appear loyal to the Crown, again being convicted of recusancy three years later,

⁴⁰ V. Burke, 'Thomas Blunt and the Earl of Essex', *Worcestershire Recusant*, 23 (1974), 7-12.

⁴¹ TNA E 368/473/21.

with two-thirds of his property confiscated.⁴² He did not submit again until 1606, with the period of ten years in which he was once again a recusant leading to him coming under increasing government surveillance.⁴³ The pattern that he followed of recusancy and then church papistry was one that can be paralleled with other contemporary Catholics.⁴⁴

In relation to the Astley Blounts, the statutes of the 1580s, designed to root out recusancy, increased the family's taste for resistance. Robert Blount of Astley was described as an 'adversary' to Protestantism by Bishop Sandys in 1564, shortly before his son, Thomas, was baptised in Astley parish church on 27 December 1564, while his children continued to be baptised there up until 1573, which was the year of his death.⁴⁵ Robert maintained a good relationship with the Astley clergy, leaving a bequests to the parish church and the parson there and requesting that tombs be placed in the church for his parents and himself. Combined, this shows at least a level of cooperation with the parish church and its officers and suggests that Robert Blount, unlike his son for portions of his life, was prepared to come to church. The last sixteenth-century Blount marriage in the parish church was also held in 1573, with the next family event being the burial of Frances Blount in 1589 – something which, for practical reasons, had to involve the parish church, regardless of family wishes or beliefs. The baptism of Thomas, son of Thomas Blount, was the next recorded family event on 30 August 1593. Apart from this, there were no Blount family events in the parish church in the latter half of the sixteenth century and early seventeenth century. Evidently, family members were less prepared to engage with the parish church after the 1580s than earlier in Elizabeth's reign. This may be linked to the increasing pressure on English Catholics to take

⁴² TNA E 377/5/27.

⁴³ TNA E 368/525/182.

⁴⁴ Marshall and Scott, 'Introduction: The Catholic Gentry in English Society', 11.

⁴⁵ *Astley Parish Registers*.

a stauncher position in their engagement with Protestantism and the English Church. Thomas Blount of Astley was, for most of his life, a church papist rather than a recusant, as was his kinsman, Sir George Blount of Kinlet.

It was usually necessary for Catholics to be buried either in the parish church or its churchyard. This was the means by which the Astley Blounts were forced to re-engage with the parish church in 1589, with the death of the recusant, Frances Blount, for example. It is somewhat ironic that recusants were thus compelled, in death, to attend the Protestant church services that they had avoided in life. However, a corpse was immune from the corrupting effects of services at a time when gradual conformity of belief was recognised as a likely outcome of regular exposure to Protestant worship, even in relation to those who had first resisted the religious changes imposed upon them.⁴⁶ At the same time the parish church also retained its sanctity, even with its adoption by the Protestant Church. As such, it was an appropriate place for a Catholic to be buried. Indeed, Sir George Blount of Kinlet (or his equally Catholic heir, Rowland Lacon, who commissioned his tomb) could have chosen to be buried in his private burial ground at Knightley in Staffordshire, yet Kinlet Church was selected for his burial, suggesting that the family had no concerns about burial in a Protestant place of worship. Elaborate tombs, such as Sir George Blount's, were arguably well-placed to inform the congregation. This can also be seen in the fact that monuments were far from static. The tomb of Thomas Blount at Kidderminster was changed over time to reflect altering priorities. It was originally commissioned from Richard Parker, alabasterman of Burton on Trent, and deliberately referenced the Kidderminster family's links to the senior Kinlet branch, with the earlier tomb of Sir John and Katherine Blount at Kinlet also produced by

⁴⁶ Duffy, *Voices of Morebath*, 180.

Parker. The two tombs were originally very close in form before, early in the seventeenth century, the Kidderminster tomb was extensively altered to tie it more closely to the later tomb of Thomas's son, Sir Edward Blount, which is close to it in the church.

In 1588 Edward Blount of Kidderminster was included in 'a note of the papists & recusants in the seuerall shires of England' and was certainly Catholic (something which will be discussed below).⁴⁷ His father, Thomas Blount, was described as a 'favourer of true religion' by Bishop Sandys in 1564. However, since his second son had been with William Allen at Louvain only two years earlier, this identification of Thomas as a favourer of Protestantism is highly questionable. Thomas Blount of Kidderminster, who married a Catholic and whose children were raised as Catholics, must have had some level of sympathy with the traditional faith if he was not a Catholic himself (see chapter 5). His widow was a recusant by 1577.⁴⁸ It is arguable that both Kidderminster tombs were intended to make statements about faith and to inform observers. Certainly, Thomas Blount's, in its original form, was very close in form to the medieval tomb of his great-grandparents, Humphrey and Elizabeth Blount at Kinlet – a monument built within the context of purgatory. The two Blount tombs in Astley Church, which were commissioned by Robert Blount of Astley in 1577 are also notably conservative in form when compared to other works by the same sculptor, John Gildon.⁴⁹ Due to their acknowledged dual function as memorials as well as intercessory objects, tombs were often amongst the only surviving material culture directly related to purgatory to survive in the

⁴⁷ 'Recusants and Priests, March 1588', ed. J.H. Pollen, *Catholic Record Society: Miscellanea XII*, 22 (1921), 125.

⁴⁸ Ryan, 'Diocesan Returns of Recusants for England and Wales 1577', 66.

⁴⁹ R. Richardson, 'The effigy tombs of the gentry of Worcestershire 1500-1700', *Transactions of the Worcestershire Archaeological Society*, 3rd series, 19 (2004), 154.

post-Reformation church and they could therefore be particularly active and pertinent objects. Blount Catholic identity was at no point straightforward.

Catholic Communities and Worship

When accused of recusancy, Lord Vaux famously attempted to claim that his household was a parish in itself, thus enabling him to attend services in his own chapel, rather than the nearby parish church, and so avoid prosecution for recusancy.⁵⁰ The obvious advantage of this was that the owner of the private chapel could select the priest and set the way in which worship was carried out there.⁵¹ A similar pattern has been identified in Lancashire where, ‘when so many of the parish clergy were crypto-Catholics, the letter and spirit of the settlement of 1559 were disregarded and even the celebration of public and private masses could not be prevented’.⁵² There, Catholicism was identified within the ‘parochial framework’ which, due to the religion’s pervasiveness in the county, was able to remain largely unchallenged.⁵³

The Blounts of Sodington, who resided at Mamble in Worcestershire, arguably made similar attempts to control the worship in their own parish church. It is clear that this branch of the family were Catholic, with family members, such as Thomas Blount of Sodington’s daughter, Dorothy Heath of Alvechurch, remaining regular recusants when no longer residing at Mamble.⁵⁴ No members of the family actually resident at Mamble (or, in fact, anyone else

⁵⁰ Godfrey Anstruther, *Vaux of Harrowden: A Recusant Family* (Newport, 1953), 113.

⁵¹ Bossy, ‘Character of Elizabethan Catholicism’, 41.

⁵² Haigh, *Reformation and Resistance*, 218.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁵⁴ Pollen, ‘Recusants and Priests, March 1588’, 125. Richardson, ‘Effigy tombs of the gentry of Worcestershire’, 152. Ryan, ‘Diocesan Returns of Recusants for England and Wales 1577’, 66.

resident in Mamble) were convicted of recusancy in the period. While the churchwardens may not have been fulfilling their reporting obligations, it was potentially due to the Blounts' ability to control the worship in their local parish church. Lists of the vicars of Mamble are very patchy, but Humphrey Longley was appointed in 1579 by Sir Leonard Meysey, who was the son of Anne Blount, a daughter of Sir Thomas Blount of Kinlet and, thus, a distant kinsman of the Sodington Blounts (although as the earlier chapter on court records shows, there was considerable conflict between the Blount and Meysey families in the period).⁵⁵ Meysey was married to a sister of the Catholic lawyer, Edmund Plowden, with these connections suggesting that he was also Catholic. Unfortunately, no details of Humphrey Longley survive, but the circumstances of his appointment do not preclude him from being a man of traditional beliefs. In any event, much of the parish clergy early in Elizabeth's reign had previously been Catholic and, thus, validly ordained in the eyes of their Catholic parishioners.⁵⁶ That the Sodington Blounts were attending parish worship may account for the fact that family members' religion was considered somewhat ambiguous, with Bishop Sandys reporting in 1564 that one family member Walter Blount of Sillington, was 'indifferent in religion or else of no religion'.

Greater evidence of the continuing importance of the parish church to the Blounts of Sodington can be seen in the construction of the Blount chapel there, which dates to approximately 1560. The chapel is now a ruin, having been allowed to fall into disrepair in the twentieth century, due to the fact that it was a Catholic chapel attached to a Protestant parish church, with the Blount family no longer in residence to fund its upkeep.⁵⁷ When the

⁵⁵ *VCH Worcestershire* 4, 237-241.

⁵⁶ Hadland, *Thames Valley Papists*, 26.

⁵⁷ *VCH Worcestershire* 4, 285-9; Alan Brooks and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Worcestershire* (New Haven, 2007), 52.

chapel was officially recognized as Catholic is unclear, although it was not before 1868 when the antiquary John Noakes, who recorded that ‘there are a few Roman Catholics at Mamble’, briefly described the church and chapel.⁵⁸ The chapel’s erection in the early Elizabethan period by a Catholic patron raises major questions, particularly since it was very much a part of the church itself, with the twentieth-century wall built to close off the chapel, dissecting Thomas Blount’s tomb chest. The Mamble chapel, which is sizeable in relation to the church, originally contained Thomas Blount’s (d.1562) tomb, depicting him as a skeletal cadaver. While usually described as a ‘family’ or ‘mortuary’ chapel, there is actually nothing in the fabric or monumental scheme of the building to distinguish it from the chantry chapels of the earlier Tudor and medieval periods, whose primary function was to assist the progress of the donor’s soul through purgatory. Chantries, which need not actually have been a physical space, were outlawed in 1547 and achieved only a limited revival under Mary I, with donors perhaps wary of confiscation by the Crown.⁵⁹ Families who owned or acquired a physical chantry chapel usually continued to use it for burial. As Catholics, it is highly probable that the Blounts of Mamble considered intercessory prayers desirable, something which most likely influenced the desire to construct the chapel.

Although rare, there are other examples of either existing chapels that continued to function as chantries or, as in the case at Mamble, of new chapels erected for the purpose. The Blounts of Mapledurham in Oxfordshire made use of a medieval chantry chapel (the Bardolph Aisle) in their local parish church, which they acquired in the first half of the sixteenth century and which they continued to use for burial and, presumably, worship in the Elizabethan period. It was in this period that the family added a door, connecting the chapel to the main body of the

⁵⁸ *Noake’s Guide to Worcestershire*, 271.

⁵⁹ H. Colvin, *Architecture and the After-Life* (New Haven, 1991), 255.

church. The chapel remains in the family's ownership today and functions as a Catholic chapel in a Protestant parish church, as, indeed, the Blount chapel at Mamble did until it was walled up in the twentieth century. The Catholic Fitzalan Chapel at Arundel in West Sussex, which is another medieval chantry chapel, has continued to fulfil a similar function and is another example of a Catholic chapel attached to a parish church. It was used as the burial place of the Catholic Fitzalan family in the sixteenth century, including the 19th Earl in 1580. Memorial masses continue to be held there for the souls of those buried in the chapel.⁶⁰ Of even greater interest is the chapel at Beoley in Worcestershire, which is only a few miles from Mamble. This chapel was constructed towards the end of the sixteenth century by the Catholic Sheldon family and has been described as a 'clandestine chantry chapel'.⁶¹ The comparison is an apt one, since, as with Mamble, there is nothing to distinguish it from earlier examples other than the fact that it was constructed in a period in which purgatory was outlawed. The chapel at Beoley still contains an Elizabethan stone altar, demonstrating that services were heard there.⁶² The chapels at Mamble, Beoley, Arundel and Mapledurham provide strong evidence of hidden Catholicism in the Elizabethan period, since there was nothing illegal in creating a family burial place. The meaning of these spaces was ambiguous enough that it could exist both as a simple memorial to deceased family and as a chantry in which intercessory prayers could be offered to the dead. Such ambiguous messages are known from the houses of other English Catholics in the period, demonstrating that there was a desire to reference their faith by Catholics even when, in practice, they did not actually require a dedicated space for worship – a room in a house would suffice.⁶³ The existence of

⁶⁰ Ibid., 257.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Peter Davidson, 'Recusant Catholic spaces in Early Modern England' in Ronald Corthell, Frances Dolan, Christopher Highley and Arthur Marotti (eds.), *Catholic Culture in Early Modern England* (Notre Dame, 2007), 21. Indeed, Catholics in the period would have been conscious of the need for ambiguity and circumspection. Shell, *Oral Culture and Catholicism*, 9 makes this point in relation to conversation and oral culture.

the Mamble chapel and the Bardolph Aisle in Mapledurham also meant that the family could sit in private during Protestant services, without participating but still obeying the letter of the law.⁶⁴ This, coupled with the potential of local landowners to influence the worship in their parish church demonstrates ways in which ambiguity could be used to both promote Catholic identity and facilitate worship in the period. The fact that these chapels existed as part of the parish church also strongly suggests a desire to assert an ownership of the parish church, in spite of the fact that it had been adopted for Protestant worship.

Kinlet Hall housed a Catholic chapel during the Lacon family's ownership (after 1581 when they succeeded the Blounts). In 1605 Sir Francis Lacon and his daughter hosted a visit by the Jesuits Henry Garnet, John Gerard and John Percy, who were accompanied by several Catholic notables, such as Anne Vaux and Ambrose Rookwood.⁶⁵ The party were on a pilgrimage to St Winifred's Well and heard mass at Kinlet. Since Kinlet Hall had no specific chapel, this would have been a room converted in the house. Probate inventories for the Astley and Kidderminster Blounts also indicate that these families had no official private chapel – suggesting that a room in their houses would have been used.⁶⁶ Such chapels need not have been spartan. When a distant cousin, Father Richard Blount, who would later head the Jesuits in England, celebrated mass at Scotney Castle in Sussex, he used a wide range of portable equipment, such as 'church stuff and books' which were hidden with him in a priest's hole when the household was searched.⁶⁷ The family's actions contribute to the

⁶⁴ Hadland, *Thames Valley Papists*, 60.

⁶⁵ Michael Hodgetts, 'Recusants in the Midlands', *Worcestershire Recusant* (December 1986), 24-36.

⁶⁶ 'Inventories of Worcestershire Landed Gentry 1537-1786', ed. M. Wanklyn, *Worcestershire Historical Society*, New Series, 16 (1998), Inventories for Walter Blount of Astley (d.1561) and Sir Edward Blount of Kidderminster (d.1630); Michael Hodgetts, 'The Godly Garret, 1560-1660' in Rowlands, *English Catholics*, 38.

⁶⁷ W. Darrell, 'Father Blount's Escape from Scotney' in J. Morris (ed.), *The Troubles of our Catholic Forefather, First Series* (London, 1872), 208; Will Coster and Andrew Spicer, 'Introduction: The Dimensions of Sacred Space in Reformation Europe' in Will Coster and Andrew Spicer (eds.), *Sacred Space in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2005), 7; Tara Hamling, *Decorating the Godly Household* (New Haven, 2010).

contemporary historical debate on the sanctity of space, as can be seen from the pilgrimage in 1605 undertaken by a number of leading Jesuits in England, as well as many of the Catholic gentry, including Sir Francis Lacon of Kinlet and his daughter. The party visited St Winifred's Well in Flintshire which occupied a special place in late sixteenth-century English Catholicism since it was a unique survival of Catholic sacred space in the period.⁶⁸ With this expedition, Catholic priests and the laity worked together to create new sacred spaces in hitherto domestic contexts. The Sodington Blounts arguably went further – supporting the view that in some exceptional cases, such as St Winifred's Well or Mamble Parish Church, the displacement from places of worship was not total.

Kinlet, at the time of the Lacons, contained lodgings for priests with, presumably, hiding places to allow them to escape detection. It is possible that the priests at Kinlet were able to pass as upper servants and thus, have their own rooms in the hall.⁶⁹ Sir Francis Lacon and his daughter were also accompanied by servants when they made their pilgrimage to St Winifred's Well in 1605, indicating that their religious affiliations were acknowledged and supported in the household. In around 1602 or 1603, the priest at Kinlet was a man called Eresill or Eriswicke, who, when Lacon finally agreed to attend Protestant Church services, moved to stay with a widowed gentlewoman who lived close by, again demonstrating the close links that were built in the local area.⁷⁰ A second priest, who was resident at Kinlet during Elizabeth I's last years, can probably be identified (based on descriptions of their appearance) with the priest who said mass at Kinlet during the pilgrimage in 1605, indicating that he served in the household for a sustained period of time. He was also mobile in the local

⁶⁸ Alexandra Walsham, 'Holywell: Contesting Sacred Space in Post-Reformation Wales' in Coster and Spicer, *Sacred Space*, 212.

⁶⁹ Michael Hodgetts, 'A Topographical Index of Hiding-Places, III', *Recusant History*, 27 (2005), 476.

⁷⁰ Hodgetts, 'Recusants in the Midlands', Document III: Richard Bub's Calendar of Priests for Salop, 16 December 1607; TNA SP14/28/122/1.

area, spending time at Powys Castle as well as other gentry houses. Francis Lacon took a priest named Henry Shaw north to Lancashire and Yorkshire with him in 1605, where he attempted to levy a regiment to fight for the Spanish in the Low Countries.⁷¹ Lacon's distance from London in November 1605 was fortunate, since it ensured that he was not under suspicion during the Gunpowder Plot.⁷² There is also some evidence that he may have offered to inform on the Gunpowder plotters, since, in a letter from Robert Cecil of January 1606 to Sir Thomas Edmonds, which dealt with the plot, it said 'lastly, if there come a party unto you with a message as from Sir Francis Lacon I pray you to entertain him and give ear to what he shall propound unto you; for if I be not deceived he may do very good service and prove honest'.⁷³ This suggests a similar course to the one Lacon took in relation to Sir Christopher Blount following Essex's Rebellion (see below). If this is the case, he does not appear to have offered to conform fully as to religion since, six months later, Cecil received information that Lacon was harbouring a priest named Tesmond and two other Jesuits at Kinlet, with a warrant requested for a search to be carried out.⁷⁴

That the Blounts and Lacons of Kinlet were part of a wider network of Catholics is clear from other social connections. In 1573 the Earl of Shrewsbury ordered the arrest of Rowland Lacon's servant, Avery Kellett, on the charge of using witchcraft to aid Mary, Queen of Scots, with Rowland's name mentioned in connection to him when the Privy Council were informed.⁷⁵ By 1581 the Catholic Kellett had transferred to the service of Rowland's uncle,

⁷¹ Thomas Wilson to the Earl of Salisbury, 20 November 1605 (*Calendar of the Cecil Papers in Hatfield House, vol 17, 1605*, ed. M.S. Giuseppi (London, 1938)).

⁷² <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1604-1629/member/lacon-sir-francis-15689-16427> accessed 16/5/14.

⁷³ The Earl of Salisbury to Sir Thomas Edmunds, 22 January 1606 (*Calendar of the Cecil Papers in Hatfield House, vol 18, 1606*, ed. M.S. Giuseppi (London, 1940) [hereafter *Cecil Papers* 18]).

⁷⁴ William Udall to the Earl of Salisbury, 28 June 1606 (*Cecil Papers* 18).

⁷⁵ Strype, *Annals of the Reformation*, 270.

Sir George Blount, and was trusted enough to act as one of the witnesses to the settlement in which George disinherited both his daughter and his brother's son in favour of Rowland.⁷⁶

That such a controversial figure remained in the family's service is likely to have been due to sympathy for his religion. That said, however, Catholics were not always united. While Sir George Blount was godfather to his nephew and heir male, George Blount of Bewdley, who was also a Catholic, he disinherited him in favour of his sister's son, leading to at least one contemporary's surprise.⁷⁷

In addition to their private chapel, the Lacons were believed to be running a secret Catholic printing press at Kinlet in the early years of the seventeenth century. The government informer, William Udall, who was acquainted with several branches of the family, considered that the satirical work, *Prurit-anus*, was first printed there. The two known editions of this work (dating to 1609 and 1610) were printed at St Omer and smuggled in to England by a Joan and John Daubrigscourt, who were imprisoned for the offence.⁷⁸ However, this does not preclude an earlier Kinlet edition. Similarly, William Udall considered the former Jesuit Thomas Wright to be the author, a priest associated with the Lacons. His other known works, which included *A treatise, shewing the possibilitie, and conueniencie of the reall presence of our Sauour in the blessed sacrament* (1596), mostly claimed to be printed at Antwerp, although they were, in fact, secretly printed in England.⁷⁹ *Prurit-anus* was considered particularly offensive to the authorities. It was noted in 1609 by one Catholic 'now they make their cooler as if they had commission to search for two very odious books to the State, and

⁷⁶ Childe-Pemberton, *Elizabeth Blount*, 277.

⁷⁷ Erdeswick, *Staffordshire*, 173.

⁷⁸ 'The reports of William Udall, informer, 1605-1612', *Recusant History*, 8 (1966), 205.

⁷⁹ A.F. Allison and D.M. Rogers, *A Catalogue of Catholic Books in English Printed Abroad or Secretly in England* (Bognor Regis, 1956), 174-5.

extreme dangerous to Catholiks'.⁸⁰ One of these books was *Pruit-anus*, which attacked Henry VIII, Elizabeth I and James I. When it first appeared, searches were carried out at the Venetian ambassador's house, with 700 copies burned in St Paul's Churchyard.⁸¹ It is not at all unlikely that Kinlet was used for the production of Catholic works, although it cannot be proved.⁸² Laurence Warren, who was believed to have been in charge of the Kinlet press, ran a secret press in the late 1590s at the house of another gentleman in Warwickshire and it would have been possible for a similar set up to be adopted at Kinlet. The evidence of the priests, the 1605 pilgrimage and the printing press all show that Kinlet was part of a larger network of Catholic contacts.

The Blount family support the view that it was possible to be a Catholic in England in the sixteenth century, but to practice in a very different way to others of the same faith. Arguably, Catholic gentlemen drew other Catholics into their service, as well as helping to ensure that lower ranking members of society were able to continue to practice their faith. There was certainly an enduring Catholic presence at Blount family manors in Staffordshire with a 1657 survey of recusants showing that they were home to a high proportion of Catholics, often of fairly lowly position, such as husbandmen, glovers and labourers.⁸³ In around 1586 a report on the Engelfield family, who lived near Reading, recorded that the household included one James Lingar who 'under colour of teaching on the virginals goeth from papist to papist, is thought also to be a priest, so made in Queen Mary's time'.⁸⁴ The

⁸⁰ Michael Questier (ed.), *Newsletters from the Archpresbyterate of George Birkhead* (Camden 5th Series, 12, 1998), 61.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 62

⁸² Hodgetts, *Topographical Index*, 475-6.

⁸³ *Staffordshire Recusants: List Compiled in 1657*, ed. Michael Greenslade (Collections for a History of Staffordshire, Fourth Series vol II, 1958), 77.

⁸⁴ T.B. Trappes-Lomax, 'The Engelfields and their Contribution to the Survival of the Faith in Berkshire, Wiltshire, Hampshire and Leicestershire' in A.F. Allison and D.M. Rogers (eds.), *Materials Towards a Biographical Dictionary of Catholic History in the British Isles From the Breach with Rome to Catholic Emancipation* (Recusant History, vol I, 1951), 131-142.

movements of this priest ensured that the household was far from isolated, as did the fact that Catholic families often intermarried. Henry Engelfield took Elizabeth Blount of Sodington, as his second wife, ensuring that the Sodington Blounts were in contact with other Catholic gentry, often some distance from Shropshire or Worcestershire. Catholic Blounts also played prominent parts in local and national level public life.

Catholics in Public Life

Catholic loyalism was conditional and complex in the Elizabethan period, with it recognised by historians that both recusants and church papists were able to retain office and influence in society.⁸⁵ Such tacit acceptance should not, however, be seen as a form of toleration since this concept was very different in the early modern period, given the moral duty of individuals to correct religious deviance.⁸⁶ As the examples of the Blounts show, it was possible however for something approaching the modern definition of toleration to be shown to individuals who were at least tacitly (and often openly) known to be Catholics, without condoning their religion. As such, individuals occupied a liminal and insecure place in society, yet it is evident that they could also attain high office and a position of authority. It is necessary to distinguish between hostility to individuals and hostility to their ideologies.⁸⁷

Sir George Blount of Kinlet

⁸⁵ Michael Questier, 'Elizabeth and the Catholics' in Shagan, *Catholics and the 'Protestant Nation'*, 70; Walsham, *Catholic Reformation*, 16; Questier, *Catholicism and Community*; Marshall and Scott, 'Introduction: The Catholic Gentry in English Society', 10. Also see Ronald Corthell, Frances Dolan, Christopher Highley and Arthur Marotti, 'Introduction' in Corthell, Dolan, Highley and Marotti, *Catholic Culture*, 2 and Davidson, 'Recusant Catholic spaces', 21.

⁸⁶ Walsham, *Charitable Hatred*, 1.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

Sir George Blount of Kinlet, whose Catholic faith was widely known, continued to enjoy a career in public service up until his death, for example in October 1570 being appointed by the Privy Council to act in relation to a local Staffordshire dispute over ownership of a bridge.⁸⁸ In February 1575 he was again employed by the Privy Council to arbitrate in a local dispute.⁸⁹ His religion was considered to be a factor that might count against him in local employment – but it was just one factor in a number that was considered. For example, when Bishop Bentham of Lichfield identified Sir George as an adversary to true religion, who would not favour it either in ‘deed’ or ‘word’, Bentham’s local advisors still assured him that George was ‘meet to continue in office’ as a Justice of the Peace.⁹⁰ Indeed, of the ten men identified by the bishop as adversaries to religion, only four were considered not meet to continue in office. George may also have been able to use his position to protect his kin and associates since it is known that, in areas where many Catholics remained in office, there was a gap between what the state ordered and what was actually carried out at a local level, to the extent that ‘provincial evasion of central directives made uniformity an impossible aspiration and even narrow conformity hard to sustain’.⁹¹ Surviving Glebe Terriers for Kinlet demonstrate that the churchwardens were drawn from first George’s and then the Lacons’ manorial tenants, while the family appointed the local vicar.⁹² Since the churchwardens were usually responsible for denouncing an individual as a recusant, a powerful local landowner such as Sir George Blount could very effectively ensure that he was not named.

⁸⁸ *Acts of the Privy Council of England, vol 7, 1558-1570*, ed. John Roche Dasent (London, 1893), 394.

⁸⁹ *APC* 9, 88.

⁹⁰ Landor, *Staffordshire Incumbents*, 370.

⁹¹ Walsham, *Charitable Hatred*, 91.

⁹² For example, on 31 May 1589 the Kinlet churchwardens were Humphrey Southall and Allen Browne alias Smyth (*Glebe Terriers of Shropshire*, ed. Watts, 144). Both men (or their relatives) appear in the 1530s Cleobury Mortimer manor court records which were presided over by George and his mother. The Southall family had lived at Kinlet since at least the late fourteenth-century poll taxes.

Thomas Blount of Astley

In October 1598 a number of Worcestershire recusants, including Thomas Blount of Astley, were summoned to appear before the Council for unspecified offences.⁹³ While there, it appears that Thomas agreed to spy on the Earl of Essex, who was the stepson of his cousin, Christopher Blount of Kidderminster, by joining Essex's army in Ireland. According to the report of the government agent, William Udall, in October 1599, he was able to learn what had passed between Essex and the Earl of Tyrone in a treasonous interview in Ireland, when Thomas Blount and two other gentlemen hid close by in a hollow place to hear what was said.⁹⁴ Thomas's testimony was useful enough for Robert Cecil to write to the Bishop of Worcester to inform him that, when Thomas returned home, he should be dealt with 'with secrecy and security, otherwise being a recusant he may be fearful and keep out of the way. He is of an honest and loyal disposition as any of his sort may be'.⁹⁵ Udall, too, considered him to be 'a gentleman of good worth' in a letter to the queen in 1599 in which he referred to Thomas's Catholicism.⁹⁶

Thomas's recusancy left him open to government suspicion but, by proving his loyalty, he did not suffer harm, something which again supports the view that public office was not closed to Catholics during the last years of Elizabeth's reign. He was, however, not treated entirely as he would have wished. When, in 1600, he wrote to Cecil requesting that he assist him in obtaining a position in Lord Mountjoy's army in Ireland, the minister refused, stating that 'when I consider upon how hard terms the Earl of Essex stands to me, and how apt divers

⁹³ Burke, 'Thomas Blunt', 8. The offences probably related to the Worcestershire gentleman, Thomas Abington's decision to defend his property from confiscation by force. Other local gentlemen also attempted to retrieve their property in this way, including Thomas Blount of Astley.

⁹⁴ *Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Most Hon. The Marquis of Salisbury, Preserved at Hatfield House, Hertfordshire, Part 9* (London, 1902) [hereafter *Salisbury Manuscripts 9*], 384.

⁹⁵ Burke, 'Thomas Blunt', 11.

⁹⁶ *Salisbury Manuscripts 9*, 384.

of his followers are to throw imputations upon me, as one that either did or would encourage you to speak in his prejudice, I must desire to be excused for using any particular commendation of you.⁹⁷ Cecil refused to grant Thomas what he considered his promised reward. Arguably, however, Thomas who was, of course, in breach of the statutes against recusancy, received a good deal of benefit from his willingness to show his loyalty to the government. His defiance in relation to religion certainly made imprisonment a very real possibility. It is likely that the Walter Blount who was required to raise a muster of troops in Worcester by the Privy Council in July 1574 was Thomas Blount of Astley's brother, again indicating that Catholicism was not necessarily a bar to royal employment, even in relation to the defence of the realm.⁹⁸ Walter is probably also the 'Mr Blunt' who was ordered to oversee the muster at Worcester in 1580.⁹⁹ His uncle, Francis, had earlier served as a Justice of the Peace in Worcestershire in 1573, in spite of his Catholicism.¹⁰⁰ Cecil ended his letter with a cautious sign of favour to Thomas Blount of Astley: 'I shall always be disposed to give you right in anything when your name shall come in question, though to embark myself unto your desires (to whom you are but a stranger) I am not in any sort determined'.¹⁰¹

In a personal interview with Cecil in 1601, Thomas Blount of Astley assured the minister (as Cecil recorded) that 'he can reveal all of Sir Christopher Blount's practices, which in private to me he utterly condemned'.¹⁰² Thomas was not the only member of the family prepared to inform against Christopher, with Cecil's papers from 1601 recording that he was known to

⁹⁷ *Calendar of the Cecil Papers in Hatfield House, vol 10, 1600*, ed. R.A. Roberts (London, 1904) [hereafter *Cecil Papers* 10], Captain Thomas Blount to Sir Robert Cecil, 25 March 1600 and Robert Cecil to Mr Blunt, 30 March 1600.

⁹⁸ *Acts of the Privy Council of England, vol 8, 1571-1575*, ed. John Roche Dasent (London, 1894), 263.

⁹⁹ *Acts of the Privy Council of England, vol 11, 1578-1580*, ed. John Roche Dasent (London, 1895), 448.

¹⁰⁰ Appointment noted in tomb epitaphs of Walter and Robert Blount in Astley Church.

¹⁰¹ *Cecil Papers* 10, Robert Cecil to Mr Blunt, 30 March 1600.

¹⁰² *Calendar of the Cecil Papers in Hatfield House, vol 11, 1601*, ed. R.A. Roberts (London, 1906) [hereafter *Cecil Papers* 11], Thomas Blount, Captain Thomas Lea and Sir Christopher Blount, 1 February 1601.

have been reconciled to the Catholic Church while in Dublin, and that ‘these parties in England can witness it; Sir Edward Blount of Kidderminster, Sir Francis Lacon of Shropshire, and Mr Thomas Blount of Astley’.¹⁰³ Sir Edward was Christopher’s brother, while Francis and Thomas were cousins. All three were Catholic, yet they were prepared to inform the government of Christopher’s Catholicism. Lacon and Thomas Blount of Astley also served with him in Ireland.

Sir Christopher Blount of Kidderminster

Christopher Blount, who was the younger son of Thomas Blount of Kidderminster and was born in approximately 1556, was tutored by William Allen at Louvain in 1561-1562, before returning home when Allen returned to England. He matriculated along with his elder brother, Edward, at Hart Hall in Oxford in 1572 but did not take a degree, instead matriculating at the English college at Douai to train for the priesthood in 1575.¹⁰⁴ He abandoned this training the following year when the college was forced to leave Douai and, while his mother sent a servant to bring him and another pupil called Mr Throckmorton home, the pair instead went to Paris. By 30 October 1577 he had come to the attention of Sir Amias Paulet there, who, recognising Christopher’s Catholicism, advised him in an interview to ‘eschew the company’ of dissident papists, which Christopher agreed to do.¹⁰⁵ Paulet, a Puritan, was anti-Catholic, but made no attempt to persuade Christopher to abandon his Catholicism. He did however write to inform Sir Francis Walsingham in England that Christopher and a gentleman named Watkins from Dorset were ‘bothe making open

¹⁰³ Ibid., Papers concerning Sir Christopher Blount, 1601.

¹⁰⁴ Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses*, 616; *The First and Second Diaries of the English College, Douay*, ed. Thomas Francis Knox (London, 1878), 277.

¹⁰⁵ BL Cotton Caligula E VII, f.6v.

profession of Poperie' and had left Paris for England a week before in the company of a servant of Thomas Morgan's, Mary, Queen of Scots' French agent.¹⁰⁶

Christopher's Catholic background was widely known. According to a letter to Mary, Queen of Scots from Thomas Morgan in July 1585, Christopher had recently been to Tutbury, where Mary was imprisoned, to survey the state of the country there and the people, as well as 'to frame intelligence with your Majesty'.¹⁰⁷ According to Morgan, 'there arrived here [Paris] a special messenger from London, sent hither expressly by Mr Blunt unto me, with Letters declaring by the same, that he was bound to serve and honor the onely Saynt that he knows living upon the Ground, so he termed your Majesty; and that Meanes would be found to make an Intelligence with your Majesty, wherein he had and wold labor, though it cost him his Life'. This letter was delivered by Christopher's cousin, Robert Poley, who gained admittance thanks to Thomas Throckmorton, an acquaintance of Christopher's from Douai. Morgan, after speaking with Poley, considered that Christopher 'hath bene well brought upp, by his carefull and devout Parents, which be good Catholikes'. He attributed the family's ability to retain their Catholic beliefs to the fact that his father had been a kinsman of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, and that he had been honoured by him:

Yett because Leycester is a great Tyrant in the Realme, where Catholickes be so plagued, this Blunt and his elder Brother being both Catholikes, and theyr Mother a notable honest Gentlewoman, they are all forced to theyr great Charges to fawne upon

¹⁰⁶ *Copy-Book of Sir Amias Poulet's Letters, Written During His Embassy to France (A.D.1577)*, ed. Octavius Ogle (London, 1866), 163.

¹⁰⁷ *A Collection of State Papers Relating to Affairs in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth, From the Year 1571 to 1596*, ed. William Murdin (London, 1759), 446-480.

Leycester, to see if thereby they may live quiet, and not be continuallye troubled for theyr Fayth and Consciences; and by Leycesters Meanes they have bene more quietlye handled then some others, and this is the Reason they have in this Time followed Leycester, which, God knoweth, hath bene chargeable to them, for Leycester is not borne to doe good to God's people.¹⁰⁸

This is interesting since Morgan's concept of how to 'live quiet' was bound up in patronage networks. He considered that the Blounts of Kidderminster had been largely untouched by persecution due to Leicester's protection. This can be compared to the position of Thomas Blount of Astley in his attempts to secure Cecil's patronage and in Lord Mountjoy's defence of Sir Edward Blount in 1601, which was outlined in chapter 4. Effectively, a Catholic could obtain some measure of protection through service to a great Protestant lord, something which has implications for the identification of Catholics in the period.

Thomas Morgan, who had been in contact with Christopher since the latter's time in Paris, was convinced that Christopher was loyal to the Queen of Scots. In a letter of 31 March 1586, Mary was informed that both Christopher (who was then fighting in the Netherlands) and Robert Poley, were attempting to gain recruits to her service.¹⁰⁹ Morgan considered that Christopher's court links might be useful, since a brother of Lord Mountjoy (Christopher's kinsman) was believed then to be in favour with the queen and that Christopher should be asked to return from the Netherlands 'to serve her Majesty's [Mary's] turn by means of the credit he has with the other Blount [Mountjoy's brother]'. Mary, Queen of Scots wrote to

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 449.

¹⁰⁹ *Calendar of the Cecil Papers in Hatfield House, vol 3, 1583-1589* (London, 1889) [hereafter *Cecil Papers* 3], 258.

Thomas Morgan on 20 May 1586 that she had yet heard nothing from Christopher or Poley.¹¹⁰ There is, however, strong evidence that, in relation to the Queen of Scots, Christopher used his known Catholicism as a means to benefit his patron, Leicester, and the government. In Thomas Morgan's original letter to Mary, he noted that Christopher had only recently appeared more favourable to the Scottish queen ('he sheweth himself now more resolute than heretofore'), something which can be seen as the first indication that Christopher was, in fact, working for the government in his approach to Morgan and Mary. Poley, who was 'a great Frende to Christopher Blunt', was a government spy during the Babbington Plot.¹¹¹ Thomas Morgan's correspondence was intercepted by the government and used to entrap Mary, something which, if Christopher's actions had been totally loyal to her, would have meant that he would be punished in some way. Instead, throughout this period he remained high in Leicester's favour and was appointed as a captain of his army in the Netherlands.¹¹² He was also close enough to his kinsman and his family to marry Leicester's widow in 1589. In 1601, when a prisoner in the Tower for his part in Essex's Rebellion, Christopher asked during his interrogation that 'hir Majestie maye be particularly informed and remembred of those great services which he did in layend the waye open to the Erle of Leycester and Mr Secretary Walsingham for the discovery of all the Queen of Scotts practises, for which hir Majestie was at that tyme (when the Erle of Leycester went into the Lowe Countries) very unwilling to have suffred him to haue gone from hir attendance' – clear evidence that he was a government agent.¹¹³ There is speculation that he may have played a leading role passing the secret correspondence to Mary directly in 1586.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 274.

¹¹¹ Murdin, *Collection of State Papers*, 449, 506; Christopher Devlin, *Hamlet's Divinity* (London, 1963), 115.

¹¹² *Cecil Papers* 3, 963.

¹¹³ *Correspondence of King James VI of Scotland with Sir Robert Cecil and Others in England During the Reign of Queen Elizabeth*, ed. John Bruce (Camden Society, 1861), 109-110.

¹¹⁴ Devlin, *Hamlet's Divinity*, 124; Falls, *Mountjoy*, 26-28; BL Harl MSS 285, f.282.

While Christopher's actions in relation to Mary, Queen of Scots are interesting, it is not actually even certain that he was then still a Catholic. In a letter written by him to Sir Francis Walsingham on 3 June 1588 from the Netherlands, he referred to his conversion to Protestantism, declaring that 'to you my soul was ever known; God hath altered me for my opinion in religion, and I not altered it to please any man but to save my soul; yet have I enemies that inform my Lord of the contrary, and that at my departure I said I would live and die a papist. You know better; wherefore as occasion is offered, certify for me both his lordship and her Majesty, who otherwise will believe of me as she heareth, because she knows me not, nor the faithful service I vow to do her'.¹¹⁵ He also spoke of his recusant brother-in-law, who was a son of George Cotton of Warblington, whom Walsingham had 'by your honourable favour toward me set at liberty', in spite of the fact that Christopher could not (as he wished) promise his conformity, 'but I will be the first that shall accuse him if I perceive he swerve in the least jot of true and sincere duty'. Walsingham was induced to free George Cotton, in spite of his Catholicism, thanks to Christopher's recommendation, while it is interesting that Christopher was prepared to vouch for his loyalty – save in regard to his religious conformity, with Cotton was left free to continue his recusancy unhindered. Christopher's conversion too is interesting, since it underlines the possibility that individuals may have changed their religion, making it very difficult to make statements about an individual's faith without firm evidence of belief at any one time. It is possible that a convert, such as Christopher, might be mistaken for a church papist.

¹¹⁵ *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign: Elizabeth, vol 21 part 4, January-June 1588* (London, 1931), 452.

Christopher did not remain a Protestant. After joining his stepson, the Earl of Essex, on campaign in Ireland, he was reconciled with the Catholic faith in Dublin by Robert Lawlor, the Catholic vicar general of the English pale and a Jesuit named Fitzsimons, attending confession with them both.¹¹⁶ He also freed two or three priests ‘of the baddest disposition’ from Dublin Castle during his time there.¹¹⁷ Interestingly, although Robert Cecil was aware of Christopher’s reconciliation as early as October 1599, the information was only used against him in 1601 following his arrest for his leading role in his stepson’s rebellion.¹¹⁸ This supports the view that Christopher, who was protected by his prominent place in Essex’s household (as his parents had been in Leicester’s household), was able to practice his religion with relative openness until it became clear that he was a threat to the state, suggesting that he was relatively free to change his religion as he chose. Alexandra Gajda and Paul Hammer, too, in their work on the Earl of Essex, has identified the strong ties of patronage that bound his followers (including Christopher) to Essex, with Gajda demonstrating that, while the hope of religious toleration was a motivation for some in the rebellion, all protested that the main motive for their involvement was loyalty to Essex’s person.¹¹⁹ Hammer, too, noted the broad range of Essex’s contacts, considering that ‘judging by the number of recusants and suspected recusants about him, a good many Catholics likewise associated their interests with Essex’.¹²⁰ This again suggests that disparity in religious beliefs between patron and client were not necessarily problematic and that, indeed, a powerful Protestant patron could allow a relatively openly Catholic client a measure of protection – as Christopher’s parents had found within Leicester’s household and as Susan M. Cogan has noted in her work on Catholic families in

¹¹⁶ *Cecil Papers* 11, Papers concerning Sir Christopher Blount, 1601.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Calendar of the Cecil Papers in Hatfield House, vol 9, 1599*, ed. R.A. Roberts (London, 1902), Thomas, Bishop of Meath, to Sir Robert Cecil, 23 October 1599.

¹¹⁹ Gajda, *The Earl of Essex*, 61; Hammer, Paul E.J., *The Polarisation of Elizabethan Politics: The Political Career of Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, 1585-1597* (Cambridge, 1999), 281.

¹²⁰ Hammer, *The Polarisation of Elizabethan Politics*, 291.

the Midlands between 1570 and 1630.¹²¹ Family members rushed to distance themselves from Christopher following his arrest, with his brother, Edward Blount of Kidderminster, writing to the chief justice of Chester to assure him that he had refused to see a servant of his 'unfortunate brother's' since he was unaware of his intentions.¹²²

In his own examinations, Christopher denied that his participation in Essex's rebellion had been on religious grounds, claiming that he joined with him due to familial loyalty.¹²³ Reports suggest that he was one of the most active in the rebellion, including running the face of one of the queen's men through so hard with his rapier that it bent.¹²⁴ It was also Christopher who raided the house of William Pickering, armourer, in order to arm the rebels.¹²⁵ At his trial he confessed his guilt to attempting to force the queen to make changes to the government, but not that he intended her death.¹²⁶ While Christopher was tried for his part in the rebellion, his religion was referred to in the proceedings at his trial. He was asked what Essex had hoped to achieve from the rebellion and whether Christopher thought that 'he would have suffered Toleration of Religion?', to which Christopher replied 'that he thought so; and said, he should be to blame to deny it: for the earl had many times said to him, that he liked not the forcing of men's consciences: and in his usual talk would say, he disliked that any should be troubled for their conscience'.¹²⁷ This was suggested to be Christopher's primary motive for taking part in the rebellion, with it claimed in court that he had told Sir John Davis that Essex had 'promised Toleration of Religion, the Catholic Religion'. He then allegedly converted Davis to Catholicism after the pair 'many times' had conferences on religion. The trial account

¹²¹ Cogan, 'Catholic Gentry, Family Networks and Patronage', 1.

¹²² *Cecil Papers* 11, Papers concerning Sir Christopher Blount, 1601.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, Examination of Sir Christopher Blount, 13 February 1601.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, William Reynolds to Sir Robert Cecil, 13 February 1601.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, Examination of William Pickering, Armourer, 18 February 1601.

¹²⁶ *Cobbett's Complete Collection of State Trials*, vol I (London, 1809), 1409-1410.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1423.

suggests that Christopher was believed to have two competing motives for his role in the rebellion: his family tie to Essex and his hopes that the Earl would permit open Catholic worship. Nonetheless, it was the first that appears to have been paramount, with Christopher himself claiming at his trial that 'my deserved, but unfatal fall, I must needs impute to my over-much love to that unhappy earl'.¹²⁸ He also emphasised his otherwise loyal service to the queen while, in an examination made on 13 February 1601, he claimed 'that in all projectes of blood, whensoever there was any plottes spoken of, he protesteth on his sowle he was ever a disswader'.¹²⁹ Christopher was not motivated by religious zeal to any great extent, perhaps because he had always been largely free to follow his faith unhindered: there is no evidence that he was in any way persecuted for his faith or even that it had hindered his career.

Christopher was executed at Tower Hill on 18 March 1601.¹³⁰ On the scaffold, he denied that he had been an instigator of the rebellion, although he confessed that he had known of Essex's discontent for three years. He then continued 'And I beseech God of his mercy to save and preserve the queen, who hath given comfort for my soul, in that I hear that she hath forgiven me all but the sentence of the law, which I most worthily deserved, and do most willingly embrace, and hope that God will have mercy and compassion on me, who have offended him as many ways as ever sinful wretch did.' He then declared 'And I beseech you all to bear witness that I die a Catholic, yet so; as I hope to be saved only by the death and passion of Christ, and by his merits, not ascribing any thing to mine own works. And I trust you are all good people and your prayers may profit me'.¹³¹ Christopher's own statement demonstrates that he considered himself to be a Catholic, although it is interesting that he also sought to

¹²⁸ Ibid., 1447.

¹²⁹ *Correspondence of King James VI of Scotland with Sir Robert Cecil*, ed. Bruce, 109.

¹³⁰ *Cobbett's State Trials*, 1409-1410.

¹³¹ Ibid., 1414-1416.

emphasise his belief in justification by faith - albeit also considering that he would benefit from prayers after death (strongly suggesting belief in purgatory). Christopher's statement, made in anticipation of death, provides a good example of the beliefs of an Elizabethan Catholic. He evidently sought to stress the similarity of his beliefs to the faith of the state, with justification by faith being a doctrine which could also be acceptable to Catholics. At the same time, he also dismissed a belief in the power of good works, while requiring assistance in purgatory. Christopher's statement is therefore suggestive of the elements of Catholic belief that could be considered important to an Elizabethan Catholic, who had at times conformed to the state's religion, at the moment of his death.

Sir Edward Blount of Kidderminster

Christopher's elder brother, Sir Edward Blount was a well-known Catholic and, at times, a recusant.¹³² In a letter written to Robert Cecil to outline a dispute in the household of Lord Mountjoy, Francis Michell, who had hoped to be appointed as Mountjoy's sole secretary, claimed that 'Mr Edward Blount, the Catholic, appointed by his Lordship superintendent of his household, made a division of the secretary employments, and shared away the two best parts'¹³³ Although Michell evidently had an axe to grind against Edward Blount, his complaint was not based upon the ground that Edward was a Catholic, with it instead referred to more as a description, albeit a potentially prejudicial one. There is strong evidence that Edward was loyal to the state, with a letter that he wrote to Robert Cecil a few months after Christopher's execution, declaring 'since I was first, by the worthy Lord Mountjoy, made known to you, I have ever much revered your name, but in regard of that most Christian and charitable commiseration which it pleased you to take of the miserable estate of my poor

¹³² Pollen, 'Recusants and Priests, March 1588', 125.

¹³³ *Cecil Papers* 11, Francis Michell to Sir Robert Cecil, 1601.

distressed brother (being never invited thereunto by any desert of his, but rather to the contrary) has caused me infinitely more and more to love you'. He sought Cecil's favour 'especially now, whilst the woful fall of my poor brother, indirectly seek the impeachment of my reputation and weakening of my estate'.¹³⁴ Edward also noted that he was reliant for protection from these slanders on his friend, Lord Mountjoy. Edward's reliance on Lord Mountjoy echoes that of Christopher's earlier relationships with the Earls of Leicester and Essex, again indicating that a position within a Protestant noble household could be enough to secure some level of religious tolerance for Catholics in the Elizabethan period. By 1604 he was involved in the collection of forced loans for the king.¹³⁵ As part of the collection of the loan, he wrote to his Worcestershire neighbour, Sir Henry Russell, to request that he pay the money due to him 'where, upon receipt thereof, I will be ready to subscribe your Privy Seal. Which, for the avoiding of blame to me and haply your own further vexation, I pray you take order so to do before the first day of the next term at my lodging aforesaid, that I be not forced to return your recusancy, whereof I presume you will have due consideration'.¹³⁶ Although Russell was never convicted of recusancy, Edward knew of his refusal to attend church and was prepared to use the information for his own protection if necessary.

Sir Michael Blount of Mapledurham

Broadening the scope of this study to consider the wider Blount family, the most striking example of a Catholic Blount to obtain high office is Sir Michael Blount of Mapledurham in Oxfordshire. The Mapledurham Blounts were largely Catholic and Michael was probably no exception. He built the manor house at Mapledurham, which has recently been discovered to

¹³⁴ Ibid., Edward Blounte to Sir Robert Cecil, 24 July 1601.

¹³⁵ *Little Malvern Letters I: 1482-1737*, eds. Aileen Hodgson and Michael Hodgetts (Catholic Record Series, 2011), 84, 87.

¹³⁶ *Little Malvern Letters*, 87.

have two late sixteenth-century priest holes in a first-floor room.¹³⁷ Blount was appointed as lieutenant of the Tower of London in 1590, an office that had previously been held by his father. As one of his first official duties, he was ordered by the Privy Council to examine certain prisoners as to their conformity in religion so that they could ‘be indighted according to the Statute of Recusancye’, indicating that Michael himself conformed to the authorities’ satisfaction.¹³⁸ He does, however, appear to have attempted to mitigate the harshness of the imprisonment of some Catholics in the Tower. In November 1593, he wrote to Robert Cecil to inform him that he was sending him details of communications between Captain Duffield and a Priest named Boste, before adding that ‘I humbly desire you to take compassion of the poor Duffeilde. He is a man altogether without friends (for anything that I know); he hath been long in prison and yet not charged with anything since his coming hither. He is naked of clothes, and but that I do lend him a bad bed, this cold winter nights would kill him. If any credit may be given to his earnest protestations, he greatly desires to serve her Majesty’.¹³⁹ This compassion for Captain Duffield did not prevent Michael Blount sending further information on him to Cecil two weeks later, concerning his links to English Catholics and his desire to escape prison to go and live amongst the Catholics in the north ‘for his conscience’ sake’.¹⁴⁰ Blount also took steps to ensure that the prisoners in the Tower were able to hear Protestant services, writing to Cecil to request that he ask the queen to appoint ‘some honest learned man’ to the post of parson of the Tower, since the last occupant had died.¹⁴¹ He also witnessed Sir John Perrot take the sacrament in the Tower in May 1592 before his death, when he denied that he was a Catholic.¹⁴² Although a contemporary life of

¹³⁷ Michael Hodgetts, *Secret Hiding Places* (Dublin, 1989), 32.

¹³⁸ *Acts of the Privy Council of England, vol 19, 1590*, ed. John Roche Dasent (London, 1899), 308.

¹³⁹ *Calendar of the Cecil Papers in Hatfield House, vol 4, 1590-1594*, ed. R.A. Roberts (London, 1892), Sir Michael Blount to Sir Robert Cecil, 9 November 1593.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Sir Michael Blount to Sir Robert Cecil, 23 November 1593.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Sir Michael Blount to Sir Robert Cecil, 23 November 1593.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, The Testament of Sir John Perrot, Knight, 3 May 1592.

Blount's prisoner, Philip Howard, claims that Blount 'had been very hard and harsh to him', he is also remembered for carrying letters from Howard to the queen in an attempt to obtain a meeting for Howard with his wife and family and attended Howard's deathbed in 1595 where he was observed to weep.¹⁴³ Tellingly, Blount is recorded by Henry Garnet to have referred to another prisoner, Robert Southwell, as 'that saint', while he was noted to be close to Edmund Neville, another prominent Catholic prisoner.¹⁴⁴ Blount lost favour late in 1595 when it came to the government's attention that he had been provisioning the Tower intending to hold it for the Earl of Hertford in the event of the queen's death.¹⁴⁵ This plot, which also involved the puritan Peter Wentworth, was not connected with Blount's faith and it is clear that, for him, being a Catholic was not a bar to appointment.

Walter Blount of Uttoxeter

While the above examples suggest that the Elizabethan government was prepared to be more tolerant of Catholics in official positions than often supposed, there were limits to this.

Torture was used in Elizabeth's reign and all Catholics were aware that they potentially faced arrest and imprisonment.¹⁴⁶ It was expected that Catholics should outwardly conform, thus obeying the law. This is indicated by a distant Blount cousin, Walter Blount of Uttoxeter, who was the son of the earlier Walter Blount of Uttoxeter who had been imprisoned for speaking lightly of the saints in 1535. The second Walter Blount of Uttoxeter was imprisoned

¹⁴³ *The Lives of Philip Howard, Earl of Arundel, and of Anne Dacres, His Wife* (London, 1857), 115-7. Also see Philip Caraman (ed.), *The Other Face: Catholic Life Under Elizabeth I* (London, 1960), 222.

¹⁴⁴ Christopher Devlin, *The Life of Robert Southwell, Poet and Martyr* (Bristol, 1956), 294-5.

¹⁴⁵ R.B. Manning, 'The Prosecution of Sir Michael Blount, Lieutenant of the Tower of London, 1595', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 57 (1984), 216-223; *Calendar of the Cecil Papers in Hatfield House*, vol 5, 1594-1595, ed. R.A. Roberts (London, 1894), The Queen to Sir Michael Blount 28 November 1595, Lord Buckhurst and Lord Cobham to Sir Robert Cecil, 27 November 1595.

¹⁴⁶ Kilroy, *Edmund Campion*, 8.

in the Marshalsea on the orders of the Bishop of London on 28 July 1580 ‘for papistry’.¹⁴⁷

Blount spent more than twenty years in prison, with regular convictions for recusancy and the loss of his lands.¹⁴⁸ Unlike his cousins, he was not prepared to compromise, maintaining in an interrogation in 1588 that he ‘wyll take parte with the popes armye’.¹⁴⁹ It is hardly surprising that he failed to secure his release. One advantage of his imprisonment, however, was that it allowed him readier access to Catholic priests than was available to his Catholic kin – something which has been noted by other historians.¹⁵⁰ He is known to have received visits from Catholic clergy and agents. Walter is most likely the Mr Blount in the Marshalsea who lent 10s. to one such agent in 1584 who had come to England from the continent in the company of a priest and ‘bestowed himself in going to the Marshalsea and the Gatehouse, and spake with all the papists in both places’ before moving on to other parts of the country.¹⁵¹

Given his father’s reformist beliefs in the 1530s, it is possible that Walter was a convert to Catholicism. His elder brother, William Blount of Osbaston, specifically requested in his will of 1593 that ‘my funerall and burial I will to be done without anie vaine offectacon and service but in plaine and sober manner’.¹⁵² He further requested a sermon by ‘some learned and discreete parson’, suggesting that he was a Protestant. Nonetheless, there is no evidence

¹⁴⁷ ‘A certificate of suche as remaine in prison in the Marshallsea for matters of religion July 1580’ in *Miscellanea I* (Publications of the Catholic Record Society vol I, 1905), 71.

¹⁴⁸ For example, he was convicted of recusancy as ‘Mr Walter Blunte in the Marshallsey’ in 1588 (Pollen, ‘Recusants and Priests, March 1588’, 123). In one examination he declared that ‘he never had above £5 yearly, which is seized into her Majesty’s hand in respect of his recusancy. And so saith he hath nothing to answer to her Majesty’ (*A Century of Persecution Under Tudor and Stuart Sovereigns from Contemporary Records*, ed. George Hyland (London, 1920), 403). His lands in Uttoxeter and Kingston in Staffordshire were seized in 1585 (Greenslade, *Catholic Staffordshire*, 50).

¹⁴⁹ The official lists of Catholic prisoners during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, Part II 1581-1602’ in *Miscellanea II* (Catholic Record Society), 283.

¹⁵⁰ Peter Lake and Michael Questier, ‘Prisons, priests and people’ in Tyacke, *England’s Long Reformation*, 196.

¹⁵¹ Examination of Ralph Miller, Tailor, 9 October 1584 (Hyland, *Century of Persecution*, 187).

¹⁵² TNA PROB 11/81/137.

of estrangement in the family with Walter mentioned in his elder brother's will. William made bequests first to his eldest son, Sir Thomas Pope Blount, then his younger sons George and Edward before 'the heires males of my bodye lawfully begotten' and then to his brother Walter. He did not name one of his sons, Richard, who had been ordained as a priest in the English college in Rome in 1591 and would eventually lead the Jesuits in England.¹⁵³ However, Richard was presumably intended to be included within references to William's other heirs males. This suggests that, even where there were apparent religious differences within a family, this did not lead to a breakdown in relations between them, even when inheritance by some members of the family (Richard and Walter in this case) would have been highly likely to have led to confiscation by the Crown.

Walter was not the only Blount to suffer persecution for his faith. Half a century later, when he was ordained as a priest at the English college at Rome, Francis Blount of Eye in Herefordshire, who was a descendant of the Kinlet Blounts, recalled that all of his family, save his mother, had originally been Protestants and that 'I have also many friends and relations on both sides, of either creed'.¹⁵⁴ According to his own account, 'I was a heretic until my fourteenth year, but afterwards a Catholic, having been converted to the faith by reading Catholic books, and also by the persuasion of my parents, and by the zeal and pains of some Fathers of the Society of Jesus. This was in the year 1626'. Following his conversion, Francis Blount went first to St Omer, where he began to study for the priesthood and 'frequently pondered how grievously England was afflicted by foul heresy'. Although he personally had 'suffered little or nothing on account of the Catholic faith since my confession', his family had incurred financial hardship since, Francis's 'parents at first were

¹⁵³ Thomas M. McCoog, 'Richard Blount', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

¹⁵⁴ H. Foley (ed.), *Records of the English Province of the Society of Jesus*, vol 4 (London, 1878), 439-440.

wealthy, but now, in consequence of persecutions for the Catholic faith, and adverse fortune, are reduced to moderate means'. It is interesting to note that, as with Walter Blount of Uttoxeter, punishment was not a deterrent, with the Blounts of Eye actively converting to Catholicism in spite of persecution.

Conclusion

It was famously remarked of Elizabeth I that she had no wish to 'make windows into men's hearts and secret thoughts'.¹⁵⁵ Her Act of Uniformity of 1559, which required everyone to attend the parish church on Sundays and on feast days confirmed this. Church and state were united, something which potentially made disloyalty to the Elizabethan settlement treason. What the example of the Blount family demonstrates most clearly is that it was loyalty – which meant adherence to religious statutes – rather than actual belief which was required for an individual to have a functioning role in Elizabethan society. In the event that a person's religious beliefs brought their loyalty into question (for example, with recusancy) then the individual was in danger of a fine, imprisonment or even torture or death.

Of all the examples of Catholics in the Blount family, Walter Blount of Uttoxeter is the only example of a Catholic entirely unprepared to compromise and, thus, the only true example of a Catholic who maintained a lifelong position of recusancy. Walter Blount of Uttoxeter confessed that 'he hath relieved diverse semenaryes, preestes and other traytors unto the Quene's Majesty, but sayeth he knoweth none at this daye'. This was something of an exaggeration, since it is clear that – even in prison – he remained in contact with Catholics

¹⁵⁵ Francis Bacon, *The Works of Francis Bacon, Lord Chancellor of England*, ed. Basil Montagu (Philadelphia, 1876), 254.

both at large and in prison. However, he had limited means to assist in the Catholic cause in England. By taking an uncompromising stance, Walter in fact made himself irrelevant. It was his less confrontational kin, such as Sir Francis Lacon of Kinlet, who were able to advance the cause of their religion in England, through assisting the Jesuit mission and by maintaining links amongst the Catholic community. Some level of compromise was the key to survival for most Catholics, with very few taking a position of outright disobedience.

From the evidence of the Blounts, a picture emerges of a family of largely traditional faith who maintained a number of strategies to maintain that faith. Some were recusants at times. However, others appear never to have been returned for recusancy, although their Catholic faith is clear from other sources. The members of the family who were not recusants were, of course, members of Protestant congregations. This presents something of a contradiction, as Walsham has noted: ‘one of the more distinctive features of the peculiar, hybrid species of Reformation that evolved in England was the extent to which it unwittingly facilitated the immersion and accommodation of dissent within the established church and, by extension, within English society itself. By focussing on outward conformity as a sign of consent and by committing itself to an ecclesiology that embraced both the elect and the reprobate as legitimate members of its congregations, it nurtured an environment in which bi- or multi-confessionalism became permanently entrenched’.¹⁵⁶ The Blounts show the family adapting to the religious climate in which they found themselves by a variety of different strategies, many of which were within the Protestant church itself, something which they were potentially able to shape at a local level thanks to their local dominance.

¹⁵⁶Walsham, *Charitable Hatred*, 300-301.

Identifying a Catholic in Elizabethan England can present a challenge, particularly due to the diversity of thought and responses to pressures that they exhibited. The thrust of scholarship over the last two decades has been to move away from restrictive definitions and to admit a wider variety of people into those who were considered Catholic. The evidence concerning the Blounts supports this. Despite their Catholic loyalties, they were very much a part of society- both at a national and local level – with the communities that they built adding another layer to existing networks of connections which existed in society.

Conclusion: The Blount Family in the Long Sixteenth Century

In gratitude for his uncle's generosity in naming him as his heir, Rowland Lacon provided Sir George Blount with a fine memorial in Kinlet Church in 1584. The first part of the epitaph states 'Here lyeth the body of Sir George Blount knight which was lorde of Kinlet who died in the yeare of oure Lorde God 1581. Here theyre children be John and also Dorethy. *Fiat Voluntas dei 1584 anno domini. Avous server. Jesuis Mis*'. The second, longer element, which is written in Latin has been translated as:

'Laid in this tomb is Blount of noble race,
ENNOBLED BY LIGHT of his own, and
BY THE LIGHT of his father he was;
His lineage most high, knightly by either parent,
Worthy of these was the son's knightly name;
Arms, and the charger fiery were his delight, on the day of battle,
But the palace of his King delighted his youth,
In manhood Scotland and the realms of France
Felt his generosity in war; to both he was a terror;
His neighbour's quarrels and disputes he settled all,
At home he was a man of peace,
Nor did he make unfitting nuptial for himself,
The daughter of a knight he wedded of equal lineage,
Who bore two children, of whom a daughter lives,
The son before his father sought the realms above;

After his son's death, he gives many lands to his nephew
And makes him the heir of this very place –
Rowland Lacon who laid his lifeless body in a tomb
But his spirit the realms above hold.
This Lacon an Esquire in filial memory of love
This record raised. His nephew and his heir.

CHRIST'S LIFE AIM

Be near good Christ to England,
To Prince, to Nobles,
And to all other Inhabitants;
Good Christ, I pray grant Peace –
For by this the life of men is quiet –
By this, their journey safe
And all good things do multiply.
By strife, what has been gotten
By great labour, melts away,
So to Thine own give everlasting peace –
May virtue which is learning's light,
Be given too, and blessings come –
Far off be what,
At any time may hurt'.¹

¹ Bod MS Blakeway 22.

In his uncle's epitaph, Rowland Lacon focussed on George's lineage – both through marriage and descent, his military service in France and Scotland, his connections with the royal court and his position of authority in the local area. He also referenced religion, with the inscription acceptable to the Elizabethan Protestant church, in spite of both George and Rowland's Catholicism. These were the aspects of George's life that Rowland deemed most important to present to posterity and which he calculated would do most to preserve the memory and the glory of his uncle.

Sir George Blount's tomb lies only a few metres away from the tomb of his great-grandparents, Sir Humphrey and Elizabeth Blount, who are depicted recumbent, surrounded by their offspring as weepers, on a tomb chest also decorated with an angel and the depiction of a female saint. This monument, which was erected after Humphrey's death in 1477 conveys similar sentiments to George's. Depicted in armour, Humphrey's military role was demonstrated, as were his court links thanks to the Yorkist rose *en soleil* collar around his neck. His importance in the local area is highlighted in the placing of his tomb in the chancel of the local parish church, while his faith and a desire for intercessory prayers is demonstrated by the religious iconography still clearly apparent on the monument. Finally, the heraldic beasts at the couple's feet provide information on their lineage.

Although erected a century apart, the two tombs were intended to convey a remarkably similar message. In part, this was due to the media employed. In 1560 and again in 1572, Elizabeth I issued a proclamation, prohibiting the destruction of tomb monuments since this both extinguished 'the honourable and good memory of sundry virtuous and noble persons deceased', as well as placing 'the true course of inheritance' in peril, since tombs had always

recorded marriages, lineages and genealogy.² It was therefore considered acceptable by many (although by no means all) Protestants for tombs to be produced as a means of remembrance of the dead, rather than in a bid to attract intercessory prayers.³ However, it is clear that while tombs were considered to be acceptable to the Elizabethan authorities due to the statements they could make about inheritance, this was not all the Blount tombs, or other monuments like them sought to convey. In spite of the discontinuity between the late fifteenth century and the late sixteenth century in many areas of life, the tombs present a picture of remarkable stability and continuity: much of how the gentry viewed themselves and their roles had remained the same. In this, they were both static in the stability they presented and active in the messages that they sought to convey and in the fact that both tombs were able to tread a delicate path between overt religious iconography and the state-sanctioned role of providing genealogical information: both survived the destruction of tombs in the early years of the Reformation and, later, in the mid-seventeenth century. These, and other aspects of the Blount family's lives, show remarkable stability throughout the years of the long sixteenth century.

There was a substantial political culture existing at a local level in the sixteenth century. Local interests were central to the Blount family and the gentry of the period. While the parish increased in prominence to become the most important local administrative unit by the end of the sixteenth century, all branches of the Blount family confirm historians'

² *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, vol 2, eds. Paul Hughes and James Larkin (1969), 146-9; John Weever, *Antient Funeral Monuments of Great Britain, Ireland, and the Islands Adjacent* (London, 1767), li; Philip Lindley, *Tomb Destruction and Scholarship* (Donnington, 2007), 4.

³ Stephen Gardiner outlined this dichotomy in May 1547, complaining that the destruction of images 'conteineth an enterprise to subvert religion and the state of the worlde with it; and specially the nobilite, who, by images, set forth their lineage and parentage with remembrance of their state and arts' (quoted from Lindley, *Tomb Destruction*, 21).

understanding of the continuing importance of the manor.⁴ The family's manors witnessed change, with economic diversification increasing to some extent and enclosure clearly a contentious issue. However, some elements of the family's role within the localities remained similar to their late medieval involvement. The examples advanced above show that the Blounts were well integrated into their local community, as, indeed, do the subjects of other gentry studies from the period.⁵ The manor also provided members of the family with a local political role, since it allowed them to dominate local political structures, such as the manor court, the Shrievalty, the Justices of the Peace and the administration of the local church.

An analysis of the Blounts' local role has also allowed contemporaries' understanding of gentility to be considered. The evidence of family members, particularly Robert Blount of Eckington who in many ways lived as a yeoman, support views of the diversity of the gentry class. At the same time, the analysis undertaken above of those men qualified to serve as a Justice of the Peace or Sheriff demonstrates the small pool that the central government effectively had to work with, suggesting that their choice of local officeholders was considerably constrained. This is an important insight and one that deserves further, broader, study.

In the tomb memorial that he provided for Sir George Blount, Rowland Lacon recorded of his uncle that 'his neighbour's quarrels and disputes he settled well', demonstrating that George's role in local justice was considered one of the most important roles that he fulfilled

⁴ Harrison 'Manor Courts', 51; Mitson, 'The Significance of Kinship Networks', 24, 29; Outhwaite, *English Ecclesiastical Courts*, 1; Sharpe, *Crime in Early Modern England*, 25, 85; Waddell, 'Governing England', 29.

⁵ For example, Broad, *Transforming English Rural Society*; Broadway, 'No Historie So Meete'; Eales, *Puritans and Roundheads*; Larminie, *Wealth, Kinship and Culture*; O'Day, *An Elite Family*.

during his lifetime. George was certainly regularly involved in litigation, as claimant, defendant, witness and (in the case of the manor court or as a Justice of the Peace) judge. The sixteenth century is well known as a litigious age and the Blounts support ideas that even relatively lowly members of the community could access the courts and, potentially, use them in sophisticated ways. There was considerable selectivity employed by would-be litigants from all levels of society in the court in which they issued their claim. In part, this was due to the type of justice on offer: members of the Blount family can be observed issuing in the Chancery courts when it was in their interests to do so, most notably when they wanted a trust arrangement to be recognised. Conversely, if they did not want a trust to be recognised (as in Dorothy Purslowe's claims regarding her father, Sir George Blount's, estate) they might issue in the common law courts. Lower down the social scale, litigants who were also manorial tenants were able to access central courts, such as Star Chamber, without any apparent bars. Such cases in central courts, however, were still highly dependent on the local political culture. While Star Chamber might give judgment (as in the case of *Southall v. Blount*), it was often necessary for the manor court to enforce it, something which was not always achieved, while the evidence for most central courts was gathered in the localities and the common law courts and Chancery did not require litigants to travel to London. While, at first glance, the voluminous evidence of litigation relating to the Blounts and their manors might suggest a society in disharmony, the evidence as outlined above instead supports a picture of litigation used to promote settlement.

Parliament was, of course, primarily still viewed as a court in the sixteenth century, although its role in litigation was increasingly recognised following the Reformation Parliament in 1529. Interestingly, Rowland Lacon made no mention of Sir George Blount's regular service as a Member of Parliament in his tomb memorial, suggesting that it was considered of lower

importance compared to George's other achievements. This view accords very well with the evidence of the Blount family's service which, although scant, suggests that they had little interest in actually taking part in parliamentary activities. Where the evidence is particularly interesting is in relation to the elections themselves, with members of the Blount family involved in four contested elections in the period considered – a startling number given the prevailing historiographical position that Tudor elections tended to be foregone conclusions. Clearly, elections and electioneering were grounded within local political culture. A seat in parliament was an important marker of local status, something which could make them hotly contested.

In light of this finding, it is no surprise that it was difficult to identify the involvement of noble patrons in relation to the election of the Blounts, since their own local prestige was usually enough to secure election. The Blount family were, however, heavily involved in patronage networks, both as patron and client throughout the period under study. In the medieval period, patronage is usually expressed in military terms and it is military service that tends to be most visible in the historical record. However, as was shown in relation to the Blounts and their wider family, service in a nobleman's retinue encompassed peacetime as well as war, while the retinues of members of the Blount family can be characterised as a master/servant relationship. This can be seen too in the later periods under study here. Members of the family in the early and late sixteenth century both kept men who can be considered retainers and were bound to a lord in a way that should be considered a retinue relationship, with the survival of retinues into the late Elizabethan period acknowledged by historians. At the same time, it is clear that they continued to play a prominent role in the militia, with the demands of recruitment falling increasingly heavily on the family, and other members of their class, as the century progressed.

While Rowland Lacon was able to claim on his uncle's memorial that 'the palace of his King delighted his youth', George never established himself at court, nor seems to have attempted to do so. Instead, he served John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland, during the 1540s and 1550s. Equally, the Yorkist badges displayed on the collar of Humphrey Blount's effigy in Kinlet Church, which was carved during the reign of Edward IV, demonstrate that there had always been men who considered themselves directly within the patronage of the monarch. All patronage ultimately stemmed from the Crown throughout the period under discussion here, with it frequently mediated through the agency of royal officials and the nobility.

Patronage remained linked to military service in the long sixteenth century, with service in war an important route to advancement and central to ideas of gentility. As Rowland Lacon set out on Sir George Blount's tomb memorial, 'arms, and the charger fiery were his delight, on the day of battle'. A further two lines of the inscription were devoted to his feats of arms in France and Scotland, in spite of the fact there is no evidence that George's service in either campaign was particularly notable: the important point was that he had served. There is no evidence of change in this ideal from the time of his great-grandfather, Humphrey Blount, who was depicted as a knight in armour in spite of the limited time that he actually spent in battle.

The Reformation brought profound change to the worship of the state. As is already recognised, the medieval church had remained a vibrant and largely popular one. The Reformation was a long process and one which, to those who lived through it, had no clear outcome. It is therefore no surprise that it is difficult to identify any active opposition or

acceptance of the Reformation in the period before 1558 in relation to the Blounts. No branch of the family (save the first Walter Blount of Uttoxeter) shows evidence of any dramatic conversion or opposition in the period before 1558, while it is clear from their actions and those of others known in the period that the active acquisition of monastic lands was not incompatible with the retention of traditional faith.

During the Elizabethan period all major branches of the Blount family held Catholic beliefs, with their activities reinforcing the prevailing view that there were many different ways in which Elizabethan Catholics maintained and promulgated their faith. The study of the family's religion in the Elizabethan period makes an important contribution to scholarship on Elizabethan Catholicism, serving as an example of the various strategies that Catholics employed to maintain their religion. What was probably a new chantry chapel at Mamble in Worcestershire and the older Bardolph Aisle at Mapledurham in Oxfordshire allowed members of the family to attend the parish church – in accordance with statutory requirements – and yet control the worship that they heard (or did not hear) in their own private chapels. Members of the family also employed ambiguity, with tombs from the period tending to focus on the achievements of the individual commemorated rather than making an overt request for intercessory prayers. Even Sir Christopher Blount who, on the scaffold in 1601, declared that he died a Catholic, emphasised the similarities between his beliefs and those of Protestantism, declaring in particular that he believed he would be saved by his faith rather than his actions.⁶

⁶ *Cobbett's State Trials*, 1414-1416.

The Lacons at Kinlet (and probably their Blount predecessors) had their own Catholic chapel in Kinlet Hall, where services were held by clandestine priests, while the Blounts of Mapledurham constructed a house in which a number of priest holes were situated. The Blounts of Astley were more usually recusants, although they were still, on occasion, also church papists when they agreed to come to church. The Blounts of Kidderminster were well-known Catholics, yet were believed by contemporaries to have shielded themselves in the household of Robert Dudley. Christopher Blount of Kidderminster arguably also did this through his relationship to his stepson, the Earl of Essex.

One of the most important conclusions to emerge from the research above in relation to Elizabethan Catholics is the recognition that Catholicism was not necessarily a bar to public office, as has been identified in other, similar, studies.⁷ The Blounts' Catholicism was well-known to the authorities. Lord Mountjoy, too, was prepared to vouch for Edward Blount of Kidderminster at the start of the seventeenth century, while acknowledging his Catholicism.⁸ Neither Cecil nor Mountjoy appear to have considered Catholicism incompatible with loyalty, usefulness or good character. The best example is, of course, Sir Michael Blount of Mapledurham, who served as lieutenant of the Tower at the same time that he was building a manor house that contained several priest holes. He did later lose his office, but only after involving himself in a plot with the Puritan Peter Wentworth in support of the succession claims of the Protestant Seymour family. While it goes too far to argue that there was any form of religious toleration (and, indeed, the term was not then understood as it would be now), there was certainly a level of acceptance that a man could hold Catholic beliefs

⁷ Walsham, *Catholic Reformation*, 16; Questier, *Catholicism and Community*.

⁸ *CSP, Ireland, 1600*, 91.

providing that he outwardly conformed.⁹ There were, however, limits to this, as the example of the imprisoned Walter Blount of Uttoxeter shows: loyalty to the Crown was a prerequisite for this tacit acceptance.

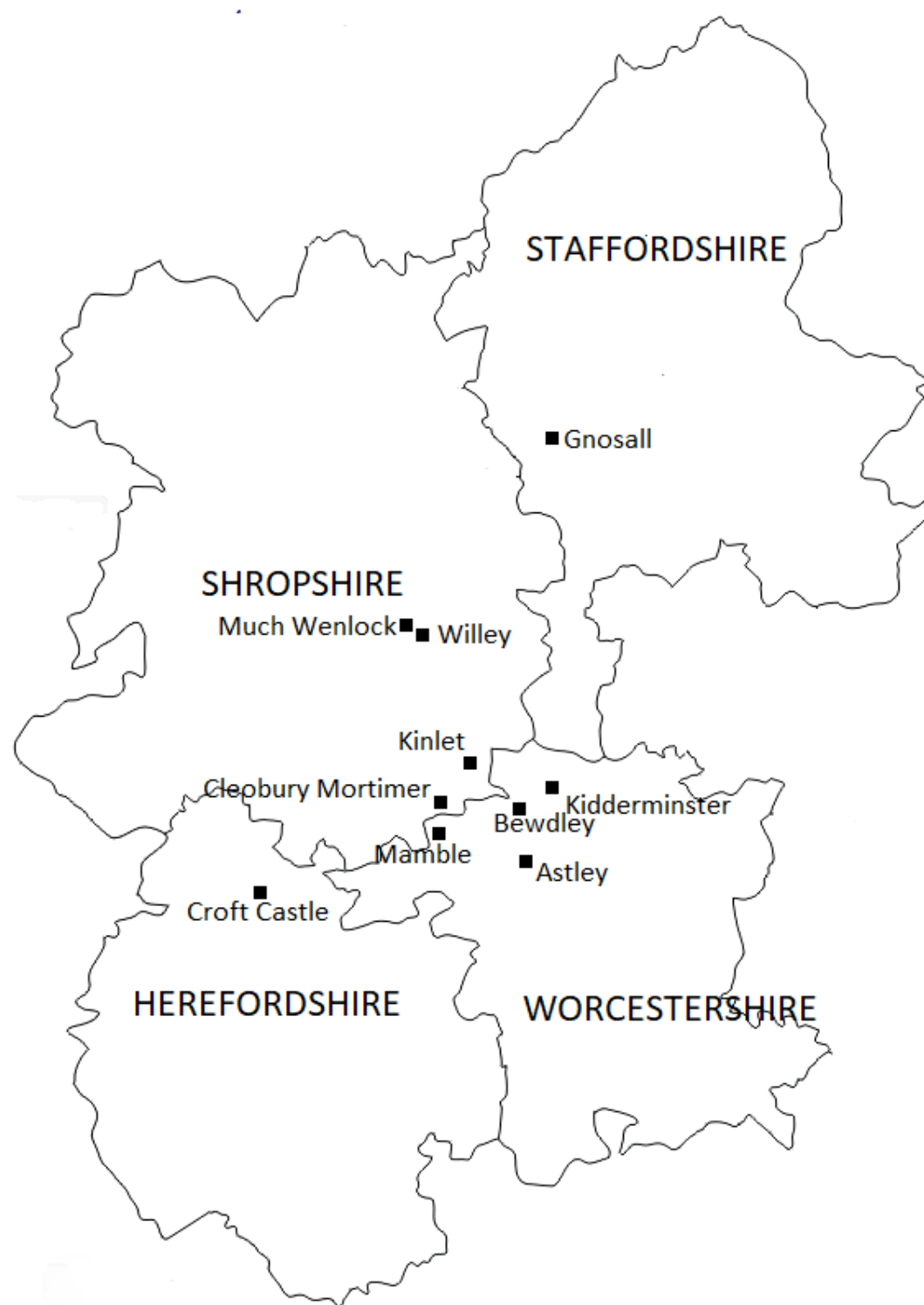
The study of the wider Blount family throughout the years of the long sixteenth century makes a very real and important contribution to scholarship in the period. By studying one family in such detail, it has been possible to test assertions made about the period and to consider in detail the activities of individuals. While deserving of study in their own right, the conclusions drawn in relation to the Blounts also have wider implications. Firstly, they can be sited within the broad range of gentry studies pertaining to the period. Secondly, a close study of this family's lives can contribute useful evidence pertaining to many of historical debates of the period. While the Blounts are, of course, one family, the conclusions drawn from them have broader implications. There is clear evidence presented here of a thriving local political culture in the sixteenth century, very much like what had existed in the medieval period, and of a two-way exchange between the localities and the centre.

The life and role of Sir Humphrey Blount of Kinlet, as a country gentleman, a judge or litigant, a member of parliament, a patron, client or soldier and his experience of religion were not so hugely different from those of his great-grandson, Sir George Blount, who was buried just over a century later and only a few feet away. The gentry, which admitted a very wide class of people, remained of considerable importance in the local area in the period, with their local importance influencing the centre as much as the centre sought to influence them. For all the great political and religious turbulence of the long sixteenth century, Sir

⁹ Walsham, *Charitable Hatred*, 1.

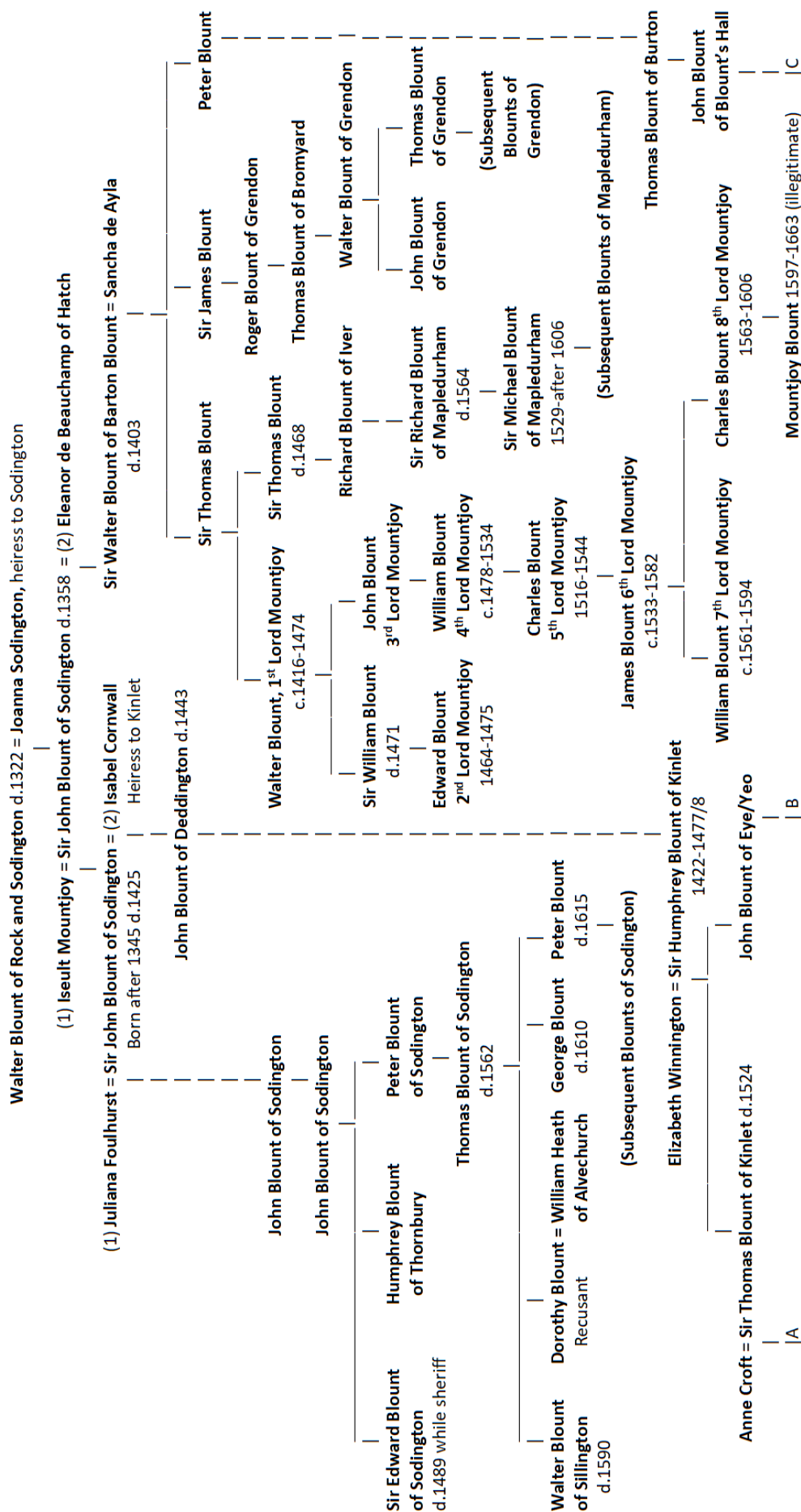
Humphrey Blount would have recognised the life led by his great-grandson, the Shropshire gentleman, Sir George Blount.

Appendix 1: Map of the West Midlands



Appendix 2: The Blount Family Genealogical Table

The Blount Family



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